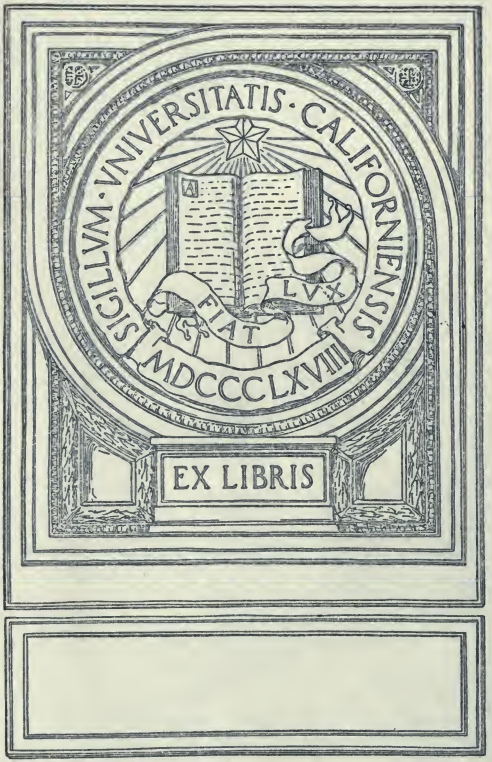
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THE MYSTERY OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

THE MYSTERY OF

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS:

An Attempted Elucidation

BY

CUMING WALTERS

London:
THE NEW CENTURY PRESS, LIMITED
434 STRAND, W.C
1899

932 x
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To My Friends,

THE MEMBERS OF THE LITERARY AND
DRAMATIC SOCIETY,
THE MEMBERS OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIETY,
AND
THE MEMBERS OF THE SPENCER CLUB,
(ALL OF BIRMINGHAM),
THIS LITTLE VOLUME IS
DEDICATED.

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FOREWORD

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FOREWORD

THE following chapters are mainly reproduced from articles contributed to the *New Century Review*. They are a modest, but, I trust, not wholly unworthy addition to the literature which in course of years has gathered about Shakespeare's Sonnets. The only merit I claim for my attempted solution of the problem they present is that I cast no aspersion upon the character of the poet, and do not impute personal offence and personal dishonour to him in order to create a basis for a theory. At a time when the traducing of our greatest poet is not, seemingly, altogether unwelcome or unpopular, and when even those who have a perfect faith in his identity do not hesitate to cast a slur upon him, or ascribe to him odious sins for which history supplies no warrant, my effort at vindication may escape contempt, though it may fail to convince. No student of Shakespeare claims that the poet was a perfect man, that he lived the life of a saint, or that he always maintained his own ideal standard. But this does not justify us in wantonly and gratuitously adding new and purely imaginary vices to the list, even if by so doing it were possible to strain an extra meaning from a few obscure stanzas.

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I have endeavoured to exclude vain fancies and to bear in mind established truths while seeking to unriddle the enigma of the Sonnets. If I have failed, at least I have left the fame of Shakespeare untainted, unbesmirched; and that fact—in these days almost a virtue—I crave to be placed to my account. I am at war with those who, simply to make their preconceived conclusions good, manufacture evil episodes in Shakespeare's career, and attribute to him undiscoverable baseness.

It may seem in the highest degree presumptuous on my part to set forth an original theory as to the meaning and motive of Shakespeare's Sonnets after the exhaustive examination of the subject by Mr. Sidney Lee. By way of extenuation, I may say—First, that the whole of my papers were written some months before Mr. Lee's volume appeared; secondly, that it has been generally admitted that, admirable as Mr. Lee's reasoning is, he has not finally and definitely solved the Sonnet problem; thirdly, that there is still a demand for "more light." Therefore, if in the smallest degree I have contributed to the truth, if by the merest chance I have directed an illuminating ray upon a dark page, or if, working in complete independence, I have in the slightest manner confirmed one of Mr. Lee's conclusions, I humbly ask to be held justified. This has been a labour of love, undertaken with an honest purpose, and now sent forth as a small but sincere auxiliary to the more valiant efforts being made to champion Shakespeare's honour, to draw the true gold from the Sonnet-

treasury, and to ward off the shafts of slander and scandal which have been directed against the poet as man.

Mr. Russell Lowell has justly observed that, despite the fragments and fleeting glimpses of autobiography we may find in the poems and dramas, there is a "grand impersonality" in all that Shakespeare wrote. "If he had sorrows, he has made them the woof of everlasting consolation to his kind; and if the outward world was cold to him, its biting air did but trace itself in loveliest frost-work of fancy on the many windows of that self-centred and cheerful soul." That the Sonnets are one of the "windows" through which we may glance into the very depth of Shakespeare's soul no one will dispute. What do we see there? Do we see the grand nature given up to a friendship with a notoriously worthless man—a man of whom even Coleridge says that "his licentiousness was equal to his virtues"?—do we find him quarrelling with that person over the part-ownership of a mistress?—do we find him publishing the story of his own folly and shame and degradation—the poet who had so fine a sense of honour, so august an appreciation of womanhood, so exalted a conception of the relationship of the sexes? It is impossible. It is out of keeping with the idea that Shakespeare understood himself, realised his genius, comprehended his mission. Yet we know that he who read mankind so well also read himself. "He seems to have been sent essentially to take universal and equal grasp of the *human* nature," as Ruskin tells us, and he was

at one with his kind. His own character shines out in his works; his periods of happiness and melancholy, of brightness and gloom, are reflected in them. We find him an erring, but not a deliberately sinful man. It is out of all question that the delineator of Rosalind, Isabel, Hermione, and Imogen, should not only have lived a squalid life with some "dark woman," but should have devoted his genius and the matchless beauty of his poet-vocabulary to celebrating the episode. The poet would choose a worthier theme for his "powerful rhyme," and would be inspired by a nobler purpose. I have sought to see the working of his mind through the "window" fashioned and provided by the Sonnets, and I find there no traces of humiliating and subservient friendship, or of ignoble intrigue. I can but hope that I have seen aright, and that I may enable the scales to fall from the eyes of those who hitherto, when gazing into the same depths, have beheld there nothing but the signs of the poet's faults and infamies.

It has been said that the Sonnets are a key to Shakespeare's heart. But the heart had many chambers, and no one key will unlock the whole. Every explanation offered is an imperfect explanation, every clue discovered is incomplete. There are secrets which defy all elucidation; mysteries which will never be solved. All the theorists on the Sonnets — the Pembroke and the Southampton theorists chief among the number—admit that their theories only apply to a proportion of the whole work. For myself I venture to claim that my own

theory offers a reasonable explanation of the whole, but does not apply to a few details which have to be specially provided for or omitted from the general consideration. That intangibility of the poet, of which Mr. Swinburne has spoken, will always cause proofs to fall short of actual and complete demonstration. Mr. George Wyndham in his admirable work ("The Poems of Shakespeare") deprecates the search for direct allusions to life in the Sonnets, with which idea I am in complete accord; and he justly adds that "the selection of their themes was based quite as much upon current philosophy and artistic tradition as upon any actual experience." May I not be deemed too presumptuous if I say that I think my theory will well fit in with this declaration, and serve as corroboration of its truth? I have endeavoured to show how and why the themes were selected, what their nature was, and how in incidental manner only they reveal the inner life of the writer. Shakespeare was pre-eminently the Artist; his Art came first, his personality second. He wrote the Sonnets during a time of storm and stress, of rivalry and attack, and of "welter and confusion of embroilment" in the theatre-war between the classical and romantic schools—Jonson, Chapman, and Marston on the one side, and Shakespeare, Dekker, and Chettle on the other. Each side satirized the other unmercifully; it seemed to be a combat *à outrance*; and during this period of struggle and uncertainty Shakespeare, following a general fashion, produced his Sonnet-sequence.

they prompted? Were they not tinged with personal feeling, and suggested by the events which so nearly concerned him as a poet and as a striver after immortality? These questions I have tried to answer. I have shown Shakespeare as the aspiring man, the conscious and assertive genius—

> Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope

—the dreamer, the idealist, the man who had to choose his course, hold fast to his purpose, and labour steadily forward to his goal. I have tried to show that from the first he had posterity before his eyes, and that with clear vision he foresaw fame, deathlessness, perpetual homage, his sovereignty in the intellectual kingdom, universal loyalty to his throne.

CHAPTER I

"WHO WAS "MR. W. H"?

CHAPTER I

WHO WAS "MR. W. H"?

The Two Points of View.

If we are really to know and understand William Shakespeare we must get rid of the sentimental legends, the superstitions, and the unprovable and unauthentic stories which at one time and another have formed the major portion of his biography. The air wants clearing of the popular errors attendant upon his fame. Blanks in his life must be left as blanks, unless they can be filled up with truths We cannot tolerate elephants in place of towns on the map of Africa, and we do not want "probables" and "perhaps's" in the place of facts in Shakespeare's career. No doubt the orthodox, though untenable, traditions will be parted with reluctantly, and he who dismisses many a favourite theory and insists upon precision and demonstration will incur the risk of being pilloried as a heretic and iconoclast. This should not, and will not, deter the conscientious seeker after truth. In the Sonnets the greatest stumbling block of all is to be found,—those misunderstood, mis-interpreted poems, which have sent scores of theorists upon a false quest and left them in confusion and darkness.

With this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart,

was Wordsworth's conviction; and sharp comes the retort of Robert Browning—

Did Shakespeare? If so, *the less Shakespeare he!*

In these two statements we get an initial instance of the contrary points-of-view of earnest thinkers. They cannot agree upon a common starting-place for their criticism and observation; while not infrequently a conclusion tenaciously held for a period is suddenly abandoned, and an entirely new theory substituted for it. In this connection nothing is more worthy of note than the complete reversal of Mr. Sidney Lee's attitude. In 1891, he believed that "William Herbert was in all probability the 'onlie begetter' of the Sonnets"; and in 1898 he found reason for amending this judgment and believing that William Hall, an obscure stationer and a piratical publisher of Thorpe's acquaintance, was the person signified. Now there is much more in this than an alteration of name. The change from Herbert, poet and patron, to Hall, a tradesman, implies a total alteration of the point of view and of the course of argument. "Begetter" no longer means "inspirer," but "procurer;" and "Mr. W. H." no longer represents the hero of the Sonnets, but a casual person who happened to obtain copies of them for the printer. Hence we learn that Mr. Lee has arrived at the conclusion that the Dedication was a mere bit of publisher's handiwork, of no literary importance, and having no connection whatever with the Shakespeare poems or

with episodes in Shakespeare's life. A great concession truly; a concession which will create a panic in the ranks of ingenious theorists that the Sonnets were dedicated to the poet's friend, and that the initials of that friend's name were W.H. It is no concern of mine to prove whether W.H. was William Hall, or any other person equally obscure: my task is only to show who "Mr. W. H." was *not* and *could not be*.

Secrecy of the Sonnets.

Every student knows the first reference to the Sonnets. It occurred in the "Palladis Tamia, Wits' Treasury," of Francis Meres, published in 1598, and ran thus: "As the soule of *Euphorbus* was thought to live in *Pythagoras*, so the sweete wittie soule of *Ovid* lives in mellifluous and hony-tongued *Shakespeare*, witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his private friends." The reference and the date are important. In 1598 the "sugred Sonnets," or some of them, were in existence, and there were "private friends" among whom to circulate them, doubtless in manuscript copies only; the poems were good enough to be talked of, and we must take for granted that Meres had read and appreciated them. But how far the poet had then proceeded in his work, how wide or how contracted was the circle of friends who knew of them, and what his intention was concerning them, no one can possibly say. Eleven years later, in 1609, Thomas Thorpe, a well-known publisher of the dramas of the leading authors of the period, sent them forth into the world as "Shake-speare's Sonnets: never before Imprinted." The publica-

tion was unauthorised and unacknowledged. The arrangement of the Sonnets was capricious. Thirty-one years later, when the next edition appeared, an entirely new arrangement was made, and some of the Sonnets then bore titles. Suffice it at this point to say that William Shakespeare, the author, never had hand or part in the publication of these poems which are said to contain the secret of his life. Certain private friends might see them, but they were not for the world.

First Theories.

From the first they seemed doomed to be misunderstood. Fanciful meanings and interpretations were given to them by a few, such as Gildon and Dr. Sewell, who deemed that the poet had no other motive than to celebrate the beauty of a mistress who had caused him pain ; Dr. Farmer, who thought they were addressed to the poet's nephew, William Hart (who, it was subsequently ascertained, would have been only nine years old at the time of Thorpe's publication, and actually unborn when the Sonnets were composed); and Tyrwhitt, who reasoned from a seeming pun that they were addressed to Will Hews, or Hughes, who has never been proved to exist* Steevens detested the Sonnets, but he dispelled one foolish error, to which some of his predecessors had been victims, that all the Sonnets were addressed to a woman. How that conclusion

*Equally preposterous was the theory of Chalmers that the Sonnets were addressed to Queen Elizabeth in flattery. But there is really no end to fantastic conjectures. A good summary of them is supplied in Charles Knight's Shakespeare, Vol. viii., and in Mr. Gerald Massey's volume, subsequently referred to.

was ever arrived at, despite sense and personal pronouns, is scarcely to be explained. But, at least, when we know that so much pure fantasy has originated from these Sonnets, we may be held justified in regarding all conclusions suspect, even when learned men and true students have arrived at them.

The "too obvious" meaning.

It was inevitable that someone should make a purely superficial analysis of the Sonnets, and it was Mr. Brown who did it. He fell a victim to the too-obvious, like the celebrated student who described the crab; and the obvious is the incorrect. Here are his divisions, such as any schoolboy would make:—

1st Poem (i.—xxvi.). To his Friend, persuading him to marry.

2nd Poem (xxvii.—lv.). To his Friend, who had robbed him of his mistress—forgiving him.

3rd Poem (lvi.—lxxvii.). To his Friend, complaining of his coldness, and warning him of life's decay.

4th Poem (lxxviii.—ci.). To his Friend, complaining that he prefers another poet's praises, and reproving him of faults that may injure his character.

5th Poem (cii.—cxxvi.). To his Friend, excusing himself for having been some time silent, and disclaiming the charge of inconstancy.

6th Poem (cxxvii.—cliii.). To his Mistress, on her infidelity.

A man who could read no deeper than this should

have shrunk from putting his commonplaces on paper. As a contrast to this simplicity we might take the extravagance of a comparatively recent work, entitled "The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr. W. H., being the true secret of Shakespeare's Sonnets, now for the first time here fully set forth," in which the daring assertion was made that "W. H." was Willie Hughes, a boy for whom Shakespeare wrote the parts of Viola, Imogen, Rosalind, and Portia. The theory was founded chiefly on the word-play in Sonnets 53, 67, 78, 79 and 86; it was upset by the fact that no such Willie Hughes was proved to have existed.

Rival Explanations.

The Sonnets have been aptly termed the "chief battle-ground in Shakespearean biography." Around them conflict wages perpetually, and the spectator of the scene cannot but observe that scarce a champion who enters the lists escapes injury, mutilation, or death. The rival theorists fight hard among themselves, and demolish each other in furious combat. Their various theories are mutually destructive, and he who favours the Southampton cause is an adept at demolishing the claims of Herbert; while the champion of Herbert utterly routs the adherents of Southampton. Both combine again to inflict defeat upon the ingenious little band, who, relying on a few stanzas, with their by-play and puns on the words "*hues*" and "*use*," set up the phantom Willie Hughes as "the master-mistress" of the poet's passion. The antagonists might be left among their own ruins, to recover as best they might from wounds that

seem fatal, or to persevere with the case which apparently has been crushed. But it happens that one champion has been left untended in the field, not as a victor who has proved his cause, but as one who still awaits the arrival of a respondent to his challenge. This is Mr. Tyler, who has ably advocated the claims of William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, to be the "onlie begetter" of the Sonnets, and has set forth reasons for believing that Mary Fytton, Pembroke's mistress, was the Dark Lady of the later stanzas. Mr. Tyler has not been utterly overthrown in argument, and long toleration of his position may have led to the misconception that he has proved his case. Mr. George Wyndham favours him; Dr. George Brandes thinks the conclusion unavoidable that Pembroke "should be identified with 'Mr. W. H.'" (vol. i. p. 315): and, as we have seen, Mr. Sidney Lee has only quite lately been converted from the same doctrine. The fear is that something like finality may begin to attach to Mr. Tyler's conclusions, and that the general mass of the public may begin to imagine that his arguments are uncontested, and therefore to be implicitly accepted, unless a very strong and determined stand is made against them. I shall presently show why I am convinced that his position is untenable, his reasoning inaccurate, and his theory unjust; but before so doing I must refer to the one conspicuous theory in opposition to Mr. Tyler's, that which aims at demonstrating that "Mr. W. H." was "H. W."—Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.

The Dedication

It will be remembered that to the first edition of the Sonnets a contorted, ungramamatical, ambiguous Dedication was prefixed, sadly out of keeping with Shakespeare's polished Dedications to *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. This Dedication, which was signed with the initials of the publisher, Thomas Thorpe, should be noted—

To. the. onlie. begetter. of.
these. insving. sonnets.
Mr. W. H. all. happinesse.
and. that. eternitie.
promised.
by.
ovr. ever-living. poet.
wisheth.
the. well-wishing.
adventvrer. in.
setting.
forth.

.T.T

The Southampton Theory

Let it be steadily borne in mind that this was purely the composition of the publisher, who, moreover, was issuing the work without the sanction of the author. There would have been a certain appropriateness in the fact that the Sonnets were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, who admittedly was the patron and friend of the poet, and to whom Shakespeare had respectfully yet devotedly inscribed the first published work. The strongest and worthiest attempt to prove Southampton the hero of the Sonnets was made by Mr. Gerald Massey in 1866, when in that valuable volume, "Shake

speare's Sonnets and his Private Friends," he brought an immense amount of scholarship and the results of research to bear upon his subject and to buttress his daring conjectures. It was a fine speculation finely treated, and we should be thankful for Mr. Massey's vain enterprise if only for the sake of the important incidental facts and discoveries to which it led him. For his enterprise *was* vain and futile; but like the voyages of early explorers who sought a non-existent El Dorado, it was valuable for the unexpected truths, the unknown territories, it revealed by the way.

Southampton was one of Queen Elizabeth's favourites, and the rival of the Earl of Essex. He offended the Queen by his courtship of Elizabeth Vernon, a maid of honour, and the Earl was ordered to keep away from Court. He travelled for a time, and took part in the campaign against Spain in 1597; but he was still in bad odour with his Sovereign when he returned. A quarrel with Ambrose Willoughby in January, 1598, and another with Earl Percy, made his position so irksome that he eventually offered service to the King of France. But in February, 1598, there were whispers of the Earl's secret marriage "to his fair mistress," and in the summer of that year all doubt as to their union was set at rest. Queen Elizabeth regarded the event with great disfavour, and ere long Southampton was ordered to the Fleet. He was not long in prison, however, and when Essex was appointed Lord Deputy of Ireland he took Southampton with him as General of Horse. But the Queen's anger was

The Story of Lord Southampton.

unappeased, and the favourite who had presumed to marry was visited repeatedly with penalties. Lord Essex became his friend, and the friendship had sad results for Southampton. He was implicated in the rebellion, was arraigned for treason, and condemned to death—a sentence subsequently commuted to life-long imprisonment. Only on the Queen's death was he released, his lands restored, and his life for the future rendered pleasant. He had a useful and not inglorious career in the American colonies.

The Sonnets as History.

Do the Shakespeare Sonnets touch upon any of these events? Mr. Gerald Massey reads in the poet's stanzas a complete history of Southampton, his ill-fated love, his enforced absences, his disfavour with the Queen, his imprisonment, and his release. Sonnet 25 tells of the first meeting; Sonnet 22 of the "tender intimacy"; Sonnet 39 shows that the two friends are "one," and so forth. Other Sonnets wish him farewell on his journeys, and welcome him on his return; the first seventeen are a direct appeal to him to marry; the following two groups praise his personal beauty; then comes a series promising him immortality; and the last set relate to a very complicated (and imaginary) plot between Elizabeth Vernon, Lady Rich, Lord Southampton, and Lord Pembroke, who are mutually jealous of each other. Such is the Massey theory—ruined by extremes.

Gerald Massey's theory is so complex, and includes so many hypotheses, that despite all its ingenuity and plausibility it is unacceptable. Not only does it ask us to credit on very slight grounds that the Sonnets were addressed to Henry

Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, but it demands that we shall believe that Shakespeare wrote some of the Sonnets at the Earl's suggestion, and others at the suggestion of the Countess, in order that this couple could send them to one another. As if this were not outrageous and unlikely enough, we next have a story arranged for us purposely to fit in with the moods, changes, phases, and hints in the Sonnets. Thus—we are to assume (there is no proof) that Elizabeth Vernon, the Countess, was jealous of her friend, Lady Rich—hence the Sonnets on jealousy; we are to assume that Elizabeth Vernon "repaid the Earl by a flirtation of her own," hence the Sonnets conveying reproaches, which we are again to assume were written by Shakespeare for the Earl to send to the lady. We are next to assume that after a period of misunderstanding and misgiving the Earl and the lady were wedded, and that Shakespeare wrote a Sonnet on their marriage; we are then to assume that when Southampton was sent to the Tower, the Sonnets on absence were addressed to him by the poet; we are to assume further that William Herbert subsequently had a guilty passion for Lady Rich, that Lady Rich was the dark lady with the "mourning eyes," that it was she who was beloved by Sir Philip Sidney, and that all these facts are directly or obliquely referred to in the last score or more of Sonnets, written, this time, by Shakespeare for Herbert. But although Lady Rich was the person, in Gerald Massey's opinion, who occasioned the most violent jealousy on the part of Elizabeth Vernon, the ad-

An overwrought idea.

mission is made that the two were always the best of friends, and that nothing parted them.

Shakespeare no huckster.

How can this medley possibly be accepted, with its unwieldly pile of assumption and its insignificant substratum of fact? How can we believe that Shakespeare, at a time of growing greatness, was content to write Sonnets on maudlin jealousy for other people, or to celebrate the intrigues of a debased courtier? Could he have infused the passion, imparted the fire, into his burning lines, if simply writing at the dictation of a Southampton and a Pembroke, and if having no better stimulus than lovers' quarrels, domestic broils, or vicious pursuits? Was it probable that Pembroke, himself no mean poet, would have entrusted Shakespeare with the story of his secret guilt, in order that the poet could enshrine it in matchless verse and help him by the advocacy of unmatched poems to ruin the life and blast the fame of one of the worthiest women of the time? Mr. Massey's theory, with all its wit and plausibility, is astounding, and it was fated to the rejection which has overtaken it. Yet his failure to prove that Shakespeare was the hack and slave of Southampton and Pembroke, and the go-between for courtiers aud their mistresses, does not wholly ruin the theory that some few of the Sonnets may have been intended for or addressed to Southampton; and to this subject I shall recur at a later stage. For the present, however, let us dismiss Southampton as "Mr. W. H.," and as in any sense the "begetter" of the Sonnets.

This brings us to the sole remaining theory, and

A false start.

the most important of all, even as it is in some of its aspects the most mischievous. It is the final and the most valiant effort to prove that "Mr. W. H." was the poet's friend and inspirer, and that the story suggested in the Sonnets was the personal history of the poet, his friend, and a mistress common to both. If this theory can be demolished, the last has been seen of that curious but misguided band of commentators, who, by a preliminary misunderstanding of the publisher's dedication, have entirely failed to grasp the significance and inner meaning of the poems. It is a thousand pities that the dedication has almost invariably been read in connection with the Sonnets, and that, as a consequence, the judgment should have been perverted from the first. One might safely affirm, that were the Sonnets put into the hands of a stranger, minus the publisher's preface, that stranger would arrive at a prompter and more probable meaning of the poems than any person can do who is first perturbed by the mysterious and equivocal allusion to "Mr. W. H." It is a mere trifle, but like the pebble in Ruskin's streamlet it may alter the whole aspect of the landscape.

The Herbert Scandal.

We will examine this subject in the light of history and logic, and see to what conclusion it brings us.

Fewer than ten years have passed since Mr. Tyler evolved his theory of William Herbert, or, rather, elaborated an idea which had been entertained by other speculative minds. Upon the frail basis of undistinguished initials he reared an immense and

attractive superstructure. Little notice would or need have been taken of this clever essay in guess-work, save for the fact that tacitly Mr. Tyler's airy vision has come to be regarded as a thing of substance. All the probabilities against it were urged at the time the volume was published, but no alternative theory was advanced. It is necessary to construct as well as to destroy, and Mr. Tyler's theory has maintained a place because there was nothing to push it from the ground. Yet this theory has no deep or firm foundation, and it must crumble away at the finger-touch of fact. A careful examination of dates and events in the lives of Shakespeare and Pembroke almost suffices to rob Mr. Tyler's case of reality.

Date of the Sonnets.

The Sonnets were avowedly the work of the poet's "pupil pen." Many of them were written before he had made a public appearence as an author, that is, before the year 1593. This we learn from the poet's own declarations. Now, William Herbert, afterwards Earl of Pembroke, was born in 1580, and consequently would be under thirteen years of age when the poems were in course of composition. He was only eighteen when Meres printed his reference to the Sonnets, which notoriously had been passed about some time previously among the poet's private friends. Three years later William Herbert ceased to be "Mr. W. H." in any sense, for the death of his father in January 1601 caused his succession to the peerage, and henceforth he was known and invariably addressed as the Earl of Pembroke. Yet we are asked to believe that eight

years afterwards a printer would presume to refer to him as "Mr. W. H." For this, of course, a reason has to be found, or, if a reason be not discoverable, one must be fabricated. Accordingly it is suggested that the reference to Herbert had to be particularly guarded, lest offence should be given to the Earl's family and friends, if he were known to be the "begetter" of the passionate poems. It appears to have been quite overlooked by the authors of this precious explanation, that if the poet's grand secret was known to a piratical publisher of the period, it was not likely to have been a secret at all. If Thorpe knew it, why not all those and more who had seen the Sonnets in private, and who certainly had greater claims to Shakespeare's confidence than the man who purloined his literary property? The explanation offered is a pure presumption, not warranted by facts or common sense. Nor was there any need to guard Herbert's character, for his immorality was notorious, and was the occasion of his public disgrace and punishment.

Nobleman or "Mr."?

The onus of proving that Shakespeare and Pembroke met and were friends rests upon the theorists who declare that Herbert was the friend addressed in almost idolatrous terms of adulation by the poet. Facts are once more against the assumption. In 1598, Shakespeare then being thirty-four years old, had written some or many of the Sonnets attesting his devotion to the "master-mistress of his passion." He certainly could not have met Herbert before this date, and it was only in 1598 that Herbert came to London and had the opportunity of encountering

Did Shakespeare know Pembroke?

Shakespeare. But did they ever meet? Let us see what Dr. George Brandes says, whilst desirious of putting the case as strongly as possible for Mr. Tyler's theory:—

> "He [Herbert] came to London . . . . and very soon, *in all probability*, made the acquaintance of Shakespeare, with whom he *doubtless* remained on terms of friendship until the poet's death." (Vol. I., p. 316).
>
> "In London, young Herbert lived at Baynard's Castle, close to the Blackfriars Theatre, and *may* thus have been brought in contact with the players. It is more *probable*, however, that [his mother] aroused his interest in Shakespeare; and, *in that case*, the poet, *in all probability*, made the acquaintance . . . in 1598." (Vol. I., p. 320).

The italics are, of course, my own. The above quotations faithfully represent the "facts" upon which the intimacy of Shakespeare and Herbert is proven, and they are characteristic of the manner in which assumptions are freely made in order to support desired conclusions. It will be seen at a glance that the whole of the case is hypothetical, that it cannot be demonstrated that Shakespeare and Pembroke were known to each other in 1598, that even if it could be this would not account for the Sonnets written previous to that date, and that even if that difficulty were somehow removed, evidence would still be wanting that this particular person was the poet's hero.

For, let us next ascertain the exact sentiments of

the poet towards his idolised friend, and observe the main thread of the story of the interwoven lives of poet, friend, and mistress. Roughly speaking—and I wish it to be understood that I am now, for the purposes of immediate argument, treating the themes of the Sonnets in a very different manner to what I shall do in the next chapters — roughly speaking, the themes of the Sonnets appear to be as follow :— The Sonnet themes, if personal.

I. Earnestly beseeching a young and handsome man to marry.
II. Revealing the poet's intense friendship for a man.
III. Deploring temporary absences and estrangements from the friend.
IV. Fearing rivals in the friend's attachment and affection.
V. Jealousy of a woman's influence over the friend.
VI. Ready to make great personal sacrifices to preserve the friend's love, and willing to overlook all faults and be deaf to scandals.

This is not the division I should make if I were dealing with the motives and meanings of the Sonnets apart from all personal issues ; but it is a fair and useful division otherwise, and in strict accordance with the reading and interpretation of Mr. Tyler, Mr. Massey, Dr. Brandes, and others.

The first point that strikes us as extraordinary is that the poet, in seventeen stanzas of increasing power, should supplicate William Herbert to marry, Why entreat Pembroke to Marry?

and marry without delay. The man thus exhorted was eighteen years of age, or, admitting a slight doubt as to the actual time of composition, was, at most, twenty-one. He was not in ill-health. He was handsome, and much sought after. He was no misogynist. At the age of seventeen he had been "quite prepared to enter upon the engagement" with Bridget Vere, daughter of the Earl of Oxford, in compliance with his parents' wishes. He was "immoderately given up to women," as Clarendon tells us. In 1601, when he was only twenty-one, he became the father of a child by Mary Fytton, a Maid of Honour to the Queen, and his intrigue with that strange beauty had extended over a considerable period. Such, then, was the young man urged to marry, lest his image should die, lest he be death's conquest, lest he be unremembered, and lest wasteful time should change his day of youth to sullied night! We can imagine how Herbert, engaged to be married at seventeen, immoderately given up to women in his youth, carrying on an intrigue with Mary Fytton, a father at twenty-one, still on the look-out for a wife, and a husband at the age of twenty-four—we can imagine with what feelings such a man would receive a seventeen-fold argument to induce him to matrimony!

Pembroke's character.

And why should William Shakespeare, player and poet, concern himself so anxiously about the marriage of this scion of a noble race, whose acquaintance (if it existed) he had only just made? Why should he throw himself with such heat into the private and domestic affairs of a man who

An unnecessary and impertinent task.

required restraint, rather than urging towards relationship with women? Seventeen Sonnets addressed to William Herbert on such a subject at this stage were not only ridiculous, but impertinent. Advice, if Shakespeare were the proper person to offer it, was required in an entirely different direction. And if the first seventeen Sonnets were actually addressed to William Herbert, then assuredly to the same person the arguments in *Venus and Adonis* were addressed, for they are identical. The passionate appeal of Venus is but an echo of the words, sentiments, and discussions of the Sonnets; or perhaps it would be safer to say that the Sonnets renew the theme upon which Venus so eloquently discoursed. But now we are confronted with a dilemma. *Venus and Adonis* was dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, and there are many who can see a subtle connection between the appeal of Venus to Adonis and the wishes of Southampton's friends as to his union with Elizabeth Vernon. There were decidedly more reasons for spurring Southampton on the subject than the young and dissolute Herbert, if, for a moment, we concede that it fell within the duty and province of Shakespeare to undertake any such task. But this is beside the question. The supporters of the Herbert theory are compelled to explain why, if Shakespeare addressed himself definitely to persons he presented William Herbert with exactly the series of arguments which had already done service in *Venus and Adonis* dedicated to the Earl of Southampton? If no personal reference were

A duplicated argument.

intended in the one case, why assume it in the other, and why above all things pick on the man least of all in need of such admonitions?

Dates against the theory.

Pembroke, says Dr. Brandes, "continued to the last the dissipated life of his youth." He was nevertheless a man of elegance and learning, and he enjoyed the friendship of other men of learning. Jonson and Chapman knew him personally, but the only time Shakespeare's name was associated with Pembroke's was in the dedication of the first folio of the poet's works. But again the theorists are baffled, if not routed, for the first folio edition was not published until seven years after Shakespeare's death, and the dedication, addressed equally to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, was entirely the product of Heminge and Condell.

Mary Fytton.

The next stage in this vague journey is the supposed Mary Fytton episode, to the doubly-obscure story an obscurer pendant. The Herbert theorists, having satisfied themselves by a mass of hypotheses, presumptions, vain imaginings, and other things of their own subtle devising, that "Mr. W. H." was the "begetter" of the Sonnets in the sense of being their inspirer; and that, by the same logic which proved Macedon and Monmouth to be alike because both commenced with an M, "W. H." must be William Herbert because the initials are the same—the theorists, having established this to their own great contentment, proceed to show that Herbert's mistress, Mary Fytton, was the "Dark Lady" of Shakespeare's Sonnets. To begin with, we may incidentally remark that the

term "Dark Lady" is unjustified and begs the question. The poet nowhere speaks of her as a "lady" or leads us to understand that she was worthy of that designation. Quite the contrary—she is "the wide world's commonplace," a "whitely wanton," a heartless temptress. No indication is given of her superiority of position, and "lady" is not the epithet to apply to her, Nor is it certain that she was "dark," save that she had

The "dark" lady.

Two pitch balls stuck in her face for eyes.

and that her eyes were "mourning."* The hypothetical Sonnets, in a vein of irony and pleasantry, do not prove that the mistress was black and swarthy any more than they prove that her "hairs were wires," that "her breasts were dun," or that her "breath reek'd." She was "whitely," "a beauty," a musician, and a possessor of a voice the poet "loved to hear." But the poet's sketch of the beauty who enthralled him is altogether indefinite, evasive, and contradictory. No portrait of the woman he referred to can be conjured up from his description. Yet even if it were proved that his mistress was dark and with black eyes, it would by no means follow that Mary Fytton were the prototype. There were more dark women than she in the reign of Elizabeth.

Just as it cannot be proved that Shakespeare ever met Pembroke, so it cannot be proved that

* *Vide* Gerald Massey's important chapters on this subject. His arguments against the woman's being "swarthy" or "black" appear to be conclusive.

Mary Fytton a stranger to Shakespeare.

Shakespeare ever met, knew, or loved Mary Fytton. She was the daughter of a Cheshire baronet; was the "wild" member of an excellent family, and was Pembroke's elder by two years, and Shakespeare's junior by fourteen years. The earliest period at which she could possibly have known the poet was in 1597, when Shakespeare's Company acted *Love's Labour's Lost* at Court—the play, by the way, in which a parallel "dark" heroine had already been celebrated. But did Mary Fytton make the player's acquaintance on this occasion? It must be assumed, first, that she was present (which is not known) at the festivities; and, second, that she, a woman of high degree, a favourite of the Queen's, was introduced to the member of a despised profession, and at once condescended to become his mistress. We will see what proof is offered of this, and again quote Brandes who sums up the case for Tyler:—

> "She *must have made* the acquaintance of the poet and player at earlier Court festivities (!). Who can doubt that it was she who made the first advance" (!).—(Vol. I. p. 330).
>
> "It has been thought surprising that in Sonnet clii., in which Shakespeare calls her forsworn because he loves his lady although married to another, he also states expressly that she, too, is married . . . It seemed difficult to reconcile this with the fact that she was also called by her father's name. It is *inferred* that she had already been married . . . the marriage performed *perhaps* by some accommodating cleric . . . But the question of her

different marriages remains somewhat obscure." —(Vol. I., p. 331-2). Character of Mary Fytton.

The italics are again mine. It will be seen there is not a single direct statement of fact in support of the contention that Shakespeare and Mary Fytton knew each other. What history records is—that the Earl of Pembroke carried on an illicit amour with Mistress Fytton; and that, in 1601, she was "proved with child, and the Earl of Pembroke, being examined, confesseth a fact." Mary Fytton gave birth to a still-born son; the Earl was cast in the Fleet, and continued in disgrace for some years. Now, if this woman were "the wide world's commonplace"—that is, a strumpet, why did the Earl "confess a fact" which brought him heavy punishment; and how is it that the "wide world's commonplace," the concubine of a player, retained her place at Court until the moment she was "proved with child"? The virgin queen did not surround herself with courtesans. If Mary Fytton were the woman of the Sonnets, she must have been particularly vile, and Shakespeare's opinion of her was decidedly depraved, for "it is quite clear that Shakespeare consented to share her favour with his friend." So says Brandes, truly interpreting the Sonnets themselves. Then, indeed, was Mary Fytton the "wide world's commonplace," the mistress to be bandied about from one to another, and not the "triumphant prize," the "pride to be proud of," who "brought a breath from a higher world, an aroma of aristocratic womanhood, into Shakespeare's

life." Brandes supports both theories: they are mutually destructive.

No Documents.

There is another strong negative fact against the Mary Fytton idea. It is supplied by Lady Newdigate-Newdegate in "Gossip from a Muniment Room." She has examined the whole of the correspondence of the Fytton family, and she says: "We have no hint in the letters that Mary had any personal acquaintance with Shakespeare."—(p. 33). To this her ladyship adds:—"From the portraits at Arbury, Mary was in no respect the brunette described by Shakespeare . . . She was fair, not 'dun'-complexioned; her hair was brown, not 'black wires;' and her eyes were grey, not 'raven black.'"—(pp. 32, 33). And at this point I might add that facts are equally against the Tylerian theory that Pembroke was the "fair" man, the hero of the Sonnets. That Shakespeare described a man of feminine fairness, a man with "woman's face, with nature's own hand painted," a man "fair in knowledge as in hue," and a miracle of beauty, is, of course, an elementary truism. But Dr. Brinsley Nicholson, in *The Athenæum* of July 11th, 1891, wrote:—

Portraits against the theory.

> "I have ascertained that the facts are as dead against W. Herbert being white and red, as is no against yes. . . . Both his portraits depict him as 'a dark man of rather rich complexion, dark hair and bearded, and very like a certain type of burly Frenchman, the eyes a dark, greyish blue, the complexion swarthy.' Dark, greyish blue eyes are not the 'fair' eyes of Sonnets 13, 83; nor can a poet, both natural

and artistic, say of such that they *gild* the object whereon they gaze (Sonnets 6, 20). Again, Herbert's hair was 'dark brown, with a chestnut tinge in it.' Hence, in regard to "buds of marjoram had stolen thy hair', it is impossible to think that buds of marjoram, dark purple-red before they open and afterwards pink, can represent 'dark auburn,' much less 'dark brown with a chestnut tinge.' The identity of Lord Herbert, afterwards third Earl of Pembroke, with Mr. W. H., being thus fully disproved, the theory that the "dark woman' was Mary Fytton, a lady of good family and a maid of honour, necessarily falls to the ground."

The historian Hallam remarks on Shakespeare's "humiliation" in addressing a youth "as a being before whose feet he crouched, whose frown he feared, and whose injuries, those of the most insulting kind, he felt and bewailed without resenting." Can it be wondered at that Hallam, taking this view of the Sonnets, fervently remarks—"It is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had never written them"? This must be the opinion of everyone who believes in the personal theory, particularly in Mr. Tyler's. "In the Sonnets, Shakespeare manifests some of the deepest phases of a healthy self-consciousness," says George Macdonald, who, nevertheless, believes that Shakespeare lived a life of shame with a married woman, that he was guilty of "special pleading, ungenuine in expression," with his friend, that, nevertheless, his friendship was "real, and grand, and divine,"

So "humiliating"—if true!

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and many other irreconcilable things. He adds that in the "environment of evil we see the nobility of the man;" but he leaves unexplained why the man of such nobility devoted his talents to writing, for eternity, the story of his detestable misconduct. The fact is, the personal theorists are always in a dilemma. Their affirmatives on the one side are always met by direct negatives on the other; their explanations always raise new questions.

The meaning of "begetter"

If Shakespeare referred to any friend at all in his Sonnets, that friend need not be looked for with the initials "W.H.;" if he referred to any woman, that woman need not be looked for as swarthy. That Thomas Thorpe used the word "begetter" in its conventional sense of "procurer" or "obtainer" we have no reason to disbelieve. "Mr. W. H." was the "begetter of the Sonnets," from a publisher's business standpoint; he had got, procured, obtained those poems which the piratical printer wished to use for his own advantage. Therefore, he thanked his valuable ally and collaborator, and wished him all happiness and "*that* eternity" spoken of by the poet. Thorpe knew nothing of the inspiration of the Sonnets; that was none of his business. He had secured them for a volume and was satisfied.

The arguments in favour of William Herbert run in a small circle, and are mainly casuistical in character. They do not make up a solid case; they only set up a plausible pretence. A dog would not be hanged upon such disconnected threads of

Traducing the poet.

dubious evidence and upon such wild theories as are produced to demonstrate that Herbert was

Shakespeare's idolised friend, and that the two shared a mistress together. One of the main supports of the whole contention is found in the loathsome assumption that Shakespeare had a mistress at all, and that he was guilty of systematic infidelity for a prolonged period. In short, the Herbert and Fytton theory rests only on the artificial basis of the poet's infamy. I object to tarnish thus the name of Shakespeare, and to supply him with an imaginary life of wanton debasement in order to bolster up the theory that the Sonnets refer to illicit passions. If the Sonnets concerning the unidentifiable "him" were addressed to a real man, the poet was a fatuous fool; if those concerning an equally unidentifiable "her" were addressed to a real woman, the poet was a debased sensualist, and I will believe neither without evidence. The personal theory is as mischievous and discreditable as it is baseless. Were the story of Herbert, Mary Fytton, and Shakespeare true, we might enquire whether Shakespeare would have been such a fool as to write the infamy of his own and his beloved friend's life in imperishable verse—verse which he knew was to live for ever, to outlast monuments? With what object would he have registered his shame in deliciously-worded stanzas? Did he simply desire to be remembered as a knave, or wish to immortalise the misconduct of a friend whom he adored? Surely he would have chosen worthier themes, and at least have spared his friend if not himself. But nothing seems too ridiculous or too far-fetched for the theorists who see persons in the

An unworthy theme.

vague "hims" and "hers" of the mystic lines. The nauseous, squalid, and pitiful theory of Shakespeare, Pembroke, and Mary Fytton is not evolved from history, but artificially composed from supposed meanings which have been read into the Sonnets. Is the theory likely, and is it one which, even if reasonable, can afford us the slightest pleasure or satisfaction? Shakespeare's life was not perfect, but surely the man is too dear to us to be the object of manufactured scandal. No record exists to prove that Shakespeare had an extravagant regard for William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, one of the debauchés of Queen Elizabeth's era.* No record exists that he was aware even of the existence of Mary Fytton, and that he wrote in unmatched verse the story of his shame. The theory is both defective and despicable. It is a pleasure to help to demolish a case which is established upon meanness, depravity, and abominations. Believe the Herbert-Fytton story with all its bearings on the poet's life, and you believe that Shakespeare was a vulgar trafficker in woman's shameful favours, and that his morality was at its lowest ebb. You believe that he urged to marriage a young man of disrepute and iniquitous life, and that—inconsistently enough—

A libel on Shakespeare.

*"I do not think that Shakespeare, merely because he was an actor, would have thought it necessary to veil his emotions towards Pembroke under a disguise, though he might probably have done so if the real object had perchance been a Laura or Leonora. . . . These extraordinary Sonnets form a poem of so many stanzas of fourteen lines each; and, like the passion which inspired them, the Sonnets are *always the same*, with a variety of expression."—*Coleridge.*

while he could not bear the temporary separation from his friend caused by a mistress, he was madly anxious to run the risk of total separation which would have been occasioned by the friend's taking of a wife. Inconsistency, thy name is Tyler! Away with all hypotheses, with all "maybe's," "probability's," and "perhaps's," which render Shakespeare an object of scorn, reveal him as an unscrupulous profligate, and make him the immortaliser of his own vice. Away with the preposterous and illogical absurdities which cause the poet to be the hack of one man, the pander to another, the victim to woman's wiles, the effacer of his nobler self. We may well pray to be delivered from the anomalies, inconsistencies, and debasements to which the Herbert theory brings us, and, at least, while evidence is lacking to the contrary, give Shakespeare the benefit, or do him the justice, of believing that he was not so vile as Mr. Tyler portrays him. It matters little who "Mr. W. H." was. It would only matter if the life of Thomas Thorpe, publisher, were being written. "Mr. W. H." was nothing to the poet—save that he robbed him, and was the accomplice of the printer for whom he procured copies of the poems. "W. H." may be William Hall, or any other obscure person of the time; the obscurer the better. Our only concern is to prove who he was *not*. If the Herbert theory can still stand, though its very foundations have been undermined, then there is strength in it of which I remain profoundly ignorant.

"W. H.," a publisher's partner.

I have sought to demolish this pernicious theory

Clearing the ground of rubbish.

for the love of Shakespeare's good name, and that in itself should be a sufficient justification. But the painful and necessary task of overthrowing Mr. Tyler's theory was entailed by the second purpose of clearing the ground of an encumbrance, and building something better in its place.

NOTE.

Three months after the arguments in this chapter were written down, Mr. Sidney Lee, by a remarkable and (for me) fortunate coincidence, defined the very person whom I indicated as the real "Mr. W. H." By a similar process of reasoning, Mr. Lee had arrived at exactly the same conclusion as myself, that the Dedication was the work of Thomas Thorpe, the publisher, and that "W. H." had earned his thanks for procuring valuable "copy." William Hall seems to have been professionally engaged in this class of work, and Mr. Lee fastens upon him as "the onlie begetter of these insuing Sonnets." *Vide* "A Life of William Shakespeare," page 92.

CHAPTER II

THE POET'S MEANING AND MOTIVE

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So long as it was thought that "Mr. W. H." was the poet's friend, hero, and inspirer, so long the way to the truth would be blocked, and the mystery of the Sonnets be impenetrable. Without indulging in any vain fantasies and grotesque speculations, but relying purely upon tangible evidence and historic fact, I have tried to demonstrate reasonably (i), that the Dedication of the Sonnets had nothing to do with the poet, but was entirely a publisher's Dedication*; (ii.), that "Mr. W. H." was obviously the acquaintance and possibly the assistant of the publisher, Thomas Thorpe; (iii.), that in no case could "Mr. W. H." be identified with William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, no known fact supporting that contention, but numerous facts

"Mr. W. H." dismissed.

*The word "begetter" ought not to be a stumbling block. As has often been pointed out before, its derivation shows the likeliest meaning attached to it by Thomas Thorpe. The Anglo-Saxon was "begatten" or "begyten"—"obtinere." Johnson declares its meaning to be "obtain," and Webster gives it as "get." "If thou a friend bi-get" (Alfred's proverbs), and "I have some cousin-germans at Court shall beget you" (Dekker), obviously have but one meaning for the verb.

totally controverting it; (iv.), that the Tylerian theory of the (so-called) Dark Lady was a monstrous and shameful assumption equally devoid of substantial proof and probability; and (v.), that the whole of the Pembroke-Fytton hypothesis is built up on the basis of the poet's infamy, and is utterly discreditable and not a little scandalous. How such a theory could ever be tolerantly regarded and come to be passively accepted is baffling to one who would fain believe that our greatest, noblest, most exalted poet, was not irredeemably profligate as a man, and was not so warped in judgment as to immortalise his least excusable follies at a time that he was married and had two daughters to think of. It is not as if there were no alternative to the Tylerian libels, to the wholesale defamation of character. Truth to tell, those libels can only be persisted in by the most tortuously ingenious of devices, by perversions of history, and by audacious conjectures unwarrantably set forth as "probable" or "doubtless" facts. It was an imperative necessity to overthrow and demolish the Herbert - Fytton nonsense before attempting to put something better in its place. Although there are a few personal references in the Sonnets, although there are one or two Sonnets apparently addressed to an individual and alluding to experiences in that individual's career, there is no reference whatever to William Herbert. The only man of the period to whom the poet could have intentionally made occasional references — the references, as a matter of fact, are very few, sparing,

and guarded—was Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, the patron to whom the first poems were dedicated. But when we have allowed for this and have eliminated those Sonnets touching on personal affairs, we still have the great mass of the poems left with their waxing and waning passion, their variety of theme and sentiment, their rapid change from hope to despair, from entreaty to rebuke, from idolatrous affection to loathing and grief, and this great mass has to be accounted for and explained on grounds quite different from personal. With what purpose, then, did William Shakespeare write his "sugred Sonnets," allowing only the eyes of his "private friends" to see them?* What meaning did he impart to them? What motive had he in view? We will try to peer a little into the workings of the great and complex mind, and find a clue to the mystery, a solution of the baffling problem, an illumination of the dark and subtle saying suggestive of a score of hidden meanings—

The central problem.

> Why write I still all one, ever the same,
> And keep invention in a noted weed,
> That every word doth almost tell my name,
> Showing their birth, and where they did proceed?

* Charles Knight sums up the poet's theme as follows:—"The theme is the personal beauty of a wonderful (imaginary youth, and the strong affection of a poet. Beauty is to be perpetuated by marriage, and to be immortalised in the poet's verses. Beauty is gradually to fade before Time, but is still to be immortalised. Beauty is to yield to death, as the poet himself yields, but its memory is to endure in 'eternal lines.'" It will at once be seen that this only covers one part of the subject; otherwise it is commendable. It leaves the "dark lady" series unaccounted for.

Once more, as a necessary preliminary, let us mark the salient points in the history of these Sonnets. They were first heard of publicly in 1598, when Francis Meres mentioned them in his "Palladis Tamia." The poet was then thirty-four years of age, and had published only *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* both in glowing and grateful terms addressed to the Earl of Southampton. The existence of the Sonnets was known to but a few. Exactly at what period they were written, and over what period they extended, must remain largely a matter of dispute. They were passed about in manuscript—whether few or many no one can say—among a select circle of friends. Everything points to the fact that the poet *did not desire their publication*. Shakespeare was on the verge of great literary activity, and within two years some half-dozen dramas were to delight and amaze his contemporaries. But not so the Sonnets. They were secret. They do not even appear to have been placed in any order. It is almost safe to assume that they were written a few at a time, that occasionally a long interval elapsed before adding to the number (*vide* Sonnets c. and civ. for internal evidence to this),* and that by reason of their

Privacy desired.

*Where art thou, Muse, that thou forgett'st so long,
To speak of that which gives thee all thy might? . .
. . . . . .
Return, forgetful Muse. . . . . (c.)

. . . . . Three winters' cold
Have from the forest shook three summers' pride, &c. (civ.)

character the poet deemed them quite unfit for issuing in printed form. They were most carefully and sedulously kept within the cognisance of a few. Yet someone betrayed the poet, and Thomas Thorpe's "Mr. W. H." got possession of the coveted treasures. Eleven years after Meres's reference to the "sugred Sonnets," Thorpe published the poems, without the authority and consent of the author. Shakespeare was helpless to prevent this act of piracy. All that he could do was to refuse the slightest acknowledgment that the work was his. He maintained a Sphinx-like silence. He gave no sign to the end of his life that he had written the Sonnets. So far as that goes, we only impute them to him to this day, convinced that the author of the Dramas and the author of the Sonnets must have been one and the same. And that raises the next point—the intimate connection in language, thought, and subject between the Dramas and the Sonnets. Suffice it that Shakespeare was no consenting party to the printing of the Sonnets or to their attribution to himself. The fact is most important. It is a clue of which every investigator must take advantage. The Sonnets were not reprinted in the poet's lifetime; thirty-one years elapsed before any re-issue took place, and then, as showing the capricious and uncertain nature of the business, and the dubiety which existed as to the meaning of the compositions, the stanzas were re-arranged in their order and incoherently confused. Whether they have ever been placed in their proper order, or ever can be, is a matter of doubt.

The Poet's Silence.

With this strange fact, then, the history of the Sonnets begins—that the author of 154 exquisite and matchless poems not only refrained from giving them to the public, but neither accepted nor claimed the authorship, nor the fame and honour attaching to the authorship, when they were given to the public by another person. Such marvels are rare, though not unexampled. Thomas à Kempis and Sir Thomas Malory are enigmas in literature; but they belonged to an earlier era, and, so far as we can guess, had religious scruples or monastic reasons which could not apply to William Shakespeare. We must look otherwhere for his motives and secrecy, and for the causes of his self-abnegation.

A mystery of Literature.

Suppose a man of immense potentiality feels the surging of mighty impulses within him, feels a vast inspiration coming upon him, feels the giant force of irrepressible genius stimulating him to Titanic exertions—suppose that man casts the new-born, burning thought into the first convenient mould he knows of: what then? That mould, however beautiful it may be, has only served a primary purpose. It has preserved certain forms and ideas; but it is not the finished masterpiece which the great, original, divinely-gifted artist and artificer yearns to produce. He has found an outlet for his strength, but not *the* outlet. Before his ecstatic and entranced vision, as he has glanced from earth to heaven in fine frenzy, have glided lovelier apparitions, miracles of symmetry, grandeur, and radiance. In the meantime he has exercised himself and has gathered material. Those first exercises, that

A hypothesis

immature and unfinished material, are not for the public eye. They may be shown to the few; the many must be kept in ignorance of them. Higher developments are to take place.

Enshrining thoughts.

More. In the first convenient form the poet can readily enshrine his own secret thoughts, his self-communings, his inner sentiments, his spiritual confidences. He may, as it were, record as in a diary the emotions of the hour, the thoughts and aspirations of his life; or he may turn some incident to account, graving it upon a tablet, and making the sonnet "a moment's monument." Did William Shakespeare do these things in that early period of his life when, like a rushing mighty wind, the inspiration came upon him, and he planned the immortal dramas which told of love and passion, of hope and despair, of life, death, and the hereafter, of man's destiny, of the human soul, of the acts and aspirations of men striving to be gods, and of gods that had played the parts of men? He wrote, he preached, he drew the illuminant truths and the golden wisdom from the deeps of his own experience, the recesses of his own heart, the profundities of his reflecting spirit. Do we not find the Sonnets, like so many tributary streams, ever feeding that main and unfathomed river of literature to which his series of dramas may be likened? If we do, as I dare assert, then we are near to the solution of the mystery which surrounds the composition of the Sonnets, the reluctance to publish them, the refusal to acknowledge them, the indifference to their fate, and their variety of themes.

For there is no greater delusion than to think that the Sonnets are a connected and composite whole. They are separable, disjointed, and inconsistent. They range from private moralising in the silence and secrecy of the chamber to fiery declamations; from the treatment of a favourite theme, or toying with a special subject, to the commemoration of public events; from exaggerations of the imagination to trite observations on the commonplace. Sonnet sequences were the fashion of the time. The brief, pithy stanzas were of particular utility to a poet anxious to cage fugitive thoughts and not to lose random impressions; he wrote magnificently because he could not help writing magnificently; he could take pride and pleasure in this pastime which, after all, had its serious side; he could reveal himself to himself in the sanctity of a diary-like record; but it was not for a gaping crowd who saw him on the stage, or for the admiring assembly who loved "mellifluous and hony-tongued Shakespeare," to know that he admitted even to himself that he had

A disconnected story.

> Made himself a motley to the view,
> Gor'd his own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
> Made old offences of affection new.

Shakespeare despised the masses.

And this, even before his place was permanently assured, and when he had yet to ask the concourse he despised to accept his life-work.*

* "When Shakespeare came first upon the scene of dramatic labour, he had to serve his private apprenticeship, to which the apprenticeship of the age in the drama had led up. He had to act first of all . . . As to the degree of merit he possessed as an actor, we have but scanty means of judging; for after-

For be it understood, Shakespeare, like his own Coriolanus, *did* despise the "general," the masses; and his Sonnets are the first to reveal that fact. He dwelt alone, unguessed at; do we not guess at him still, that shrouded man, more dim, less comprehended, than any man of his era?* But, like every recluse, Shakespeare was impelled to impart

wards, in his own plays, he never took the best characters, having written them for his friend, Richard Burbage. *Possibly the dramatic impulse was sufficiently appeased by the writing of the plays, and he desired no further satisfaction from personal representation;* although the amount of study spent upon the higher department of the art might have been more than sufficient to render him unrivalled as well in the presentation of his own conceptions. But the dramatic spring, having once broken the upper surface, would scoop out a deeper and deeper well for itself to play in. . . . Nor would it be long before he would submit one of his own plays for approbation; and then the whole of his dramatic career lies open before him. . . ."—*George Macdonald.*

* "A popular player—nobody suspected he was the poet of the human race; and the secret was kept as faithfully from poets and intellectual men as from courtiers and frivolous people. Bacon, who took the inventory of the human understanding for his times, never mentioned him. Ben Jonson. . . had no suspicion of the elastic fame whose first vibrations he was attempting. He no doubt thought the praise he had conceded to him generous, and esteemed himself the better of the two."—*Emerson.*

On the subject of Shakespeare's contempt for the masses the reader is referred to Brandes' biography, Vol. ii., pp. 233-4. The author identifies him with Coriolanus. Incidentally, this contempt for popularity, for the applause of the time, for "the present eye that praises the present object," throws a vivid light on Shakespeare's character and the motives with which he was inspired when engaged upon his life-labours.

in some form the secret of his heart. He shows himself in these Sonnets. Here we are fronted with him. We gaze into his eyes, and through them peer down into some of the recesses of his mind. The Sonnets are items and fragments and detached chapters of autobiography — the autobiography sometimes of the man of Stratford, sometimes of the pure man of genius, sometimes of the mere observer, the scrutiniser and student of affairs and his fellow-men. But there is no complete story; there is not even a linked series of episodes. The Sonnets are divisible into main divisions and sub-divisions, all of most unequal proportions. They may be segregated into ones, and twos, and threes, and into dozens and scores. Some are interpolated in the most haphazard manner. The last two, which are translations, have no business to be included under the one general heading at all. Even the numbering of the Sonnets conveys a false impression, and were best dispensed with; or, where there is an obvious partition between subjects, the numerals should begin afresh. These are minor flaws, but, in the search for truth, cannot be ignored. They are of the multitude of confusing details which have retarded the clarification of the subject so long. The series of Sonnets ought to be more sharply divided than they hitherto have been, and the numbering should not be consecutive. There is no call for a complete and detailed explanation of the poems as a whole and sustained composition, for the poet tells no complete or continuous story, except allegorically. The Sonnets are detached and irregular; some stand

Trifles which lead astray.

alone, obviously the result of sudden inspiration, or born of the emotion of the hour. The subjects are separated; the sentiment is distinct; there are notable isolations. History and memories, outbursts of human feeling, philosophic musing, essays on chosen or suggested themes, experiments and allegories—all these are found in the Sonnets. The autobiographical vein is never quite untraced, but the poems represent the mental attitude of Shakespeare towards persons rather than his actual relationship with them. He can surely adulate a fair man and spurn a tempting woman without having other than types in his view. He may surely recall sorrow (Sonnet xxxii.) without our insisting upon knowing what particular event had caused him a pang; bereavements, without our demanding to know whom he had lost; journeys, without our troubling to discover whether he referred to this departure or to that. He may conjure up visions (Sonnet xlvii.), without our requiring to learn the exact picture which swam before his eyes, and what person, ideal or real, was its centre. It is possible that the curious vicissitudes in the life of the Earl of Southampton impressed the poet, furnished him with a theme, and became the subject of casual stanzas. The coincidence between events in the Earl's life and the events celebrated in one or two stanzas is too great to be otherwise explicable. But even then I should contend that the poet simply used the suggested subjects as exercises, and designed them for no more definite purpose. The majority of the "personal" Sonnets, as he who runs

What the Sonnets reveal.

may perceive, were the product of various occasions, were written in moods and on impulses, and were an outlet for current thought. It is as idle to say whom most of these verses referred to as to trace the Daphnes and Celias of the seventeeth century lyrics. He who dogmatises is lost. One idea alone is predominant throughout, the idea summed up in the two phrases, one of fear, the other of hope—

> . . . Nothing stands,
> But yet to times in hope my verse shall stand.

Shakespeare realised the evanescent and perishable character of all things; yet he dared to indulge in the hope of exception for himself. Time wastes everything, yet he would raise monuments which Time could not overthrow. Such was the sublime purpose.*

Coleridge believed that all the Sonnets were addressed to a woman, and that the "outward figure" was merely a disguise; and there have been others who argued that the endearing terms applied in the Sonnets to "him" were in reality intended for a "her." But all this only makes us doubt the more whether any personal theories at all are tenable. Dr. Drake affirmed that the later Sonnets "were never directed to a real object," even if some of the first were. It is most amusing to find that

Conflicting theories.

* Charles Knight found that in twenty-six of the Sonnets, the "leading idea is that of the spoils of Time, to be repaired only by the immortality of verse," intermingled with passages "which denote that the *poet* is still speaking in character, and take the stanzas in some degree out of the range of the real."

when John Benson published the second edition of the Sonnets in 1640, he assured the reader in a prefatory note that the poetry was "seren, cleere, and elegantly plaine, such gentle strains as shall recreate and not perplexe your braine, no intricate or cloudy stuffe to puzzle intellect, but perfect eloquence." Would that he had enlightened the multitude who have been groping in darkness ever since. It is in view of the direct conflict of testimony and opinion concerning the meaning of the Sonnets that I feel justified in mentioning my own conclusions arrived at after an impartial study of the poems and ignoring for the nonce all that had been suggested in explanation of them before. I do not attempt to account for every individual Sonnet, or to prove correlativeness between them all. Neither do I think it right or necessary to do so. But I do attempt to account for the series in general, to find a reason for their composition, to define the purpose they served, and to establish the principle upon which the poet worked. This could only be accomplished after a somewhat minute analysis, and the result of such analysis I now offer.

Analysis of the series.

SECTION A.

Sonnets i.—xvii. A young man is urged to marry.

[Exactly the same theme, and a repetition of the arguments, are to be found in *Venus and Adonis*.]

SECTION B.

Sonnets xviii.—xxvi. The poet's devotion to a [man] friend, "the master-mistress of my passion."

SECTION C.

Sonnets xxvii., xxviii. Lines written in absence.

Sonnet xxix. A thought: Love surpasses ambition.

Sonnets xxx.—xxxii. Remembrances: Doubts of the future; only in love is true life.

[Here we have three themes, seemingly mere exercises for the poet. The sentiments are general and unspecific, and cannot be attached to actualities.]

Sections A, B and C may be said to form a first series, very slightly connected. But with Sonnet xxxiii. quite a new series begins, and with variations and intercalary episodes, to say nothing of interpolations on distinct subjects, it deals with the extraordinary friendship — scarcely more than a poetic possibility—between man and man.

SECTION D.

Sonnets xxxiii.—xl. The Friend, the poet's "better part," his worth, and the fear of losing him.

Sonnets xli., xlii. A woman comes between them. The poet grieves less that he has her, than that she has him. "A loss in love that touches me more nearly."

Sonnets xliii.—xlvii. Separation is bridged over by dreams, and doubts give way to evanescent hopes.

Sonnet xliii. Trifles are safeguarded, not love; that is lost which was treasured most.

[A frequently recurring theme in the dramas.]

Sonnet xlix. Should his friend frown on him, he will still know his desert.

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Sonnets l., li. A journey; loth to depart, eager to return.

Sonnets lii.—liv. The rarity and beauty of true fame.

[It should be noted that the poet's "thou" and "thee" becomes "you," until the end of Sonnet lix. The change of style in address is significant.]

Sonnet lv. The poet's belief in himself, if he lived true to his purpose.

Sonnet lvi.—lxvi. Eleven miscellaneous, loosely-linked verses, tracing the course of friendship, its dreads and jealousies. The friend has become an ideal, and in faithfulness to that ideal lies the poet's hope of immortality and that "his verse shall stand." He dreads the ravages of time*, but fame will keep him ever young. In his present state of gloom and despair he would die, but death now would mean oblivion, and he cannot "leave his love alone."

[These Sonnets are much more allegorical than personal, and describe the poet's yearning for immortality far more than his human affection for a human being.]

* Compare the following :—

Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest be hid? (Sonnet lxv.)

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
In which he puts alms for oblivion.

(*Troilus and Cressida.*)

Chas. Knight says :—"Time's chest and Time's wallet are the same; they are the depositories of what was once great and beautiful, passed away, perished and forgotten."

Sonnets lxvii.—lxxv. A further series, much in the same vein. The "fair" ideal is described, and the poet reasserts his truth and constancy to it as proof of fame. Better to be maligned than not to earn the guerdon fairly. "My spirit is thine, the better part of me." "You are to my thoughts as food to life."

An Ideal.

[The symbolic strain is again apparent, and the next stanza, with its mysterious hints, seems to clench an argument and to bring to a climax the poet's thoughts]

Sonnet lxxvi. The theme is "ever the same," always of one—"You and love are still my argument." This Sonnet, which should be very carefully read, seems to be the pivot upon which the whole series turns. It is enigmatical in phrase, yet is evidently one of the frankest of the poet's confessions, and is intended to serve an explanatory purpose. Were we only certain of the point of view, we should obtain here a complete revelation.

Sonnets lxxvii.—xcix. The climax having been reached, and the most fervent protestations of fidelity having been made, the poet now enters upon doubts and fears once more.* He begins with speaking

* Compare :—

With mine own weakness being best acquainted,
Upon thy part I can set down a story
Of faults concealed wherein I am attainted. (Sonnet lxxxviii.)

I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. (*Hamlet.*)

of the insubstantiality of things, but is cheered by the thought that memory endures. But he has a rival—a rival who worships the same object as himself, who dwells upon the theme which makes poets immortal. Is his own hope, then, only a dream? He has adversaries, but will suffer unjustly rather than abandon his friend. His sole glory is "having thee," even when the friend's name is under reproach. In absence, the friend is sorrowed for, and that absence for a time compels the poet, after the expression of his grief, to become silent. When he resumes, three years have elapsed. Such is the result of parting from the friend—"And, thou away, the very birds are mute."

Here the fourth section obviously concludes. What does it all mean? Is it an extravagant and sycophantic address from one man to another whose handsome face is his chief merit, or is it the worship of an ideal of glorious aspect by an enraptured poet? Is it personal history, beautiful but foolish, or is it a symbolic theme? It should be remembered that Shakespeare was in the midst of his crucial struggle at the time the Sonnets were composed. He had felt the greatness within him,*

Personal or allegorical?

* "He must have been perfectly conscious of his genius, and of the great trust which he imposed upon his native tongue as the embodier and perpetuator of it."—*J. Russell Lowell* ("Shakespeare once more.")

he knew the possibilities before him, he despised his calling as an actor, and he aspired after greater and more lasting renown. It was possible for him, walking the boards, to win the bubble-reputation of an hour, to be the delight and wonder of the crowd. But he contemned the crowd. He drifted further and further from the stage. His final resolve was to work for posterity, and he made his choice—"I am to wait, though waiting so be hell." Meanwhile, he only had glimpses of that fame, that immortality, which he so passionately desired (Sonnet lii.). Sometimes it seemed as if all were lost and he journeyed away from his "friend," his better part, his spiritual guide, his ideal. The Sonnets record the conflict of emotions during the time that the "pupil pen" was at work.*

Literature versus The Stage.

Having regard to these facts, we may now venture to say that Bernstorff's egregious "William Himself" ["W.H."] theory is not utterly despicable. It at least contains one germ of truth. The Sonnets, he said, were allegorical, and a diary of the poet's inner

His "inner self."

* On Sonnet xxvi., Gerald Massey comments thus:—"It is evident that this was written at a time when Shakespeare did not know where his success was to be won, or how his 'moving' on his course would be guided. Meanwhile, he asks his patron to accept these Sonnets in manuscript to 'witness duty' privately, not to 'show his wit' in public. Before daring to address him in a public dedication he will wait until his star shall shine on him graciously. . . . . Here are three indisputable facts recorded by Shakespeare himself. He writes these earlier Sonnets with his 'pupil pen ; he sends them as private exercises before he appears in print ; and he is looking forward hopefully to the time when he may be ready with a work more worthy."—[P. 29.]

self. Bernstorff failed, and became ridiculous, in trying to prove too much and in forcing his theory to an artificial conclusion. But the germ of truth was there. Confusion was made worse confounded, furthermore—as it is in the case of nearly all other theorists—by insisting upon the whole of the Sonnets being in sequence, and forming one continuous theme. Insist on coherence, and you get chaos at once; permit separation, and light and order and meaning naturally follow. The poet not infrequently started, so it seems, with a personal theme, and then allowed it to merge into allegory. Professor Masson strikes a note in the right key when he says that the Sonnets are "painfully autobiographic," that they "express the poet in his most intimate and private relations to man and nature," and that they are "a record of his own feelings and experience during a certain period of his London life." He had learnt that immortality could be procured solely by devotion to the "fair friend." The poet was dreaming of "eternal summer" and boasting of "eternal lines" dedicated to this one being. "Wherever we meet with these magnificent promises of the immortality which the poet's verses are to bestow," writes Charles Knight, after quoting Sonnets liv. and lv., "we find them associated with that personage, the representative at once of Adonis and of Helen, who presents himself to us as the unreal coinage of the fancy."

The desire for remembrance.

After the three years' interval which divides the first ninety-nine Sonnets from the remaining fifty-odd, the poet catches up again the closing chords,

"Do thy office," Muse!

and renews his theme, bidding his forgetful Muse to return and

> . . . . straight redeem
> In gentle numbers time so idly spent;
> Sing to the ear that doth thy lays esteem,
> And gives thy pen both skill and argument.
> Rise, resty Muse. . . .

Here we have the obvious indication that the poet cannot, with satisfaction to himself, depart from a cherished subject. He must renew the contest with Time; he must give his love fame "faster than Time wastes life"; he must strive again to immortalise the ideal, to make it impervious to the scythe of death, and he offers the assurance of constancy and devotion in the words—

> My love is strengthen'd, though more weak in seeming;
> I love not less, though less the show appear.

"Do thy office, Muse!" is his command to himself, to the genius within him; and in some twenty-five further stanzas he develops his theme which may be summed up in a sentence—Love is the master of Time, the conqueror of Death. Only when this thesis has been sufficiently expounded do we come to the most remarkable and mysterious change in the tone and subject of the Sonnets. With Sonnet cxxvii. the "black" beauty, the so-called "Dark Lady," is introduced, and her epiphany marks the most important and surprising variation in the poet's course. Every theory as to the meaning of the Shakespeare Sonnets must stand or fall upon the correct interpretation of this sequence (cxxvii.—clii.) in which the poet is seen

wrestling with his "bad angel," and in the throes of a critical conflict.

We shall see him in the midst of a soul-struggle, debating within himself whether to remain faithful to the friend of his adoration or to turn aside and follow the smiling woman who offers him the golden apples—apples which will turn to dust at a touch. He stands at the crossings of life and wonders which leads him to the true goal. His desire is for an imperishable name. He wished the after-ages to remember and to treasure him, for a Carlyle to arise who should say: "We can fancy him as a radiant aloft over all the nations of Englishmen, a thousand years hence"—"the King Shakespeare who shines in crowned sovereignty over all, noblest, gentlest, indestructible." It was for such guerdon that Shakespeare lived and wrought. It is in the Sonnets that we learn the great fact, and mark the fight and the conquest.

The fight for fame.

CHAPTER III

THE CONTENDING SPIRITS, "FAIR" AND "DARK"

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THE venturesome individual who comes forward asserting that a solution has been found to the problem of Shakespeare's Sonnets, encounters the risk of being classed with the pretended discoverer of perpetual motion, or of the philosopher's stone, or of the identity of the Man in the Iron Mask. Yet theorists there will always be, because there is an irresistible fascination in the search after the truth, and it may be that by diligent investigation, or by chance steps, we may suddenly emerge from darkness into light. But if the mysterious Sonnets are to yield up their secret, we must, at least, keep to facts, not overstraining them and not suppressing them; and we must cease to rely, as so many theorists have done, upon fancies and presumptions. I have endeavoured throughout to keep clear of extremes, and though my conclusions may be no more correct than the others I have dismissed, yet assuredly they will be no more false. At all events, I do not construct my case on the frail basis of initials, or compose it out of the supposititious shame and folly of the poet, or derive it from a few puns or word-plays in half-a-dozen of the hundred and fifty-

A hazardous task.

odd poems. My contentions, whether good or ill in the logical sense, at least reflect no unworthiness on the name and fame of William Shakespeare.

In the previous chapter I tried to show that Sonnets i.—xcix. were divisible into four sections, dealing with a series of themes, more or less recording thoughts on favourite subjects and the conflict of emotions during the period that the poet's "pupil pen" was at work. I argued that there was an autobiographical strain in most of the Sonnets; that some of them enshrined facts and experiences in the poet's life; and that most of them possessed an allegorical significance. With the hundredth Sonnet a new series begins, and we learn from that series itself that a three years' interval had elapsed since the preceding Sonnet was composed. Proceeding with our analysis, then, on the same lines as before, we find that the hundredth Sonnet begins a fifth series, separated from A, B, C, and D by the interval of time, but renewing the theme last touched upon.

The contest with time.

SECTION E.

Sonnets c., ci. A call to the Muse to speak again of "that which gives her all her might." She must prevent Time using his "scythe and crooked knife"—that is, shortening the poet's fame.*

* Compare with the speech of Ulysses to Achilles in *Troïlus and Cressida*:—

> The cry went once on thee,
> And still it might, and yet it may again,
> If thou would'st not entomb thyself alive,
> And case thy reputation in the tent. (*Act iii., Sc. 3.*)

Sonnets cii. — civ. His love has been strengthened and his purpose has been fortified after this interval, though "less the show appear." He had placed small value on his works, and he had feared his power to perform his supreme task (ciii.), yet he is resolved to be constant to his ideal—"to no other pass my verses tend."

Sonnets cv., cvi. Renewed protestations of constancy, though the theme be an old one. (Compare Sonnets lix., cvi., cviii.). But he counts "no old thing old, thou mine, I thine."

Sonnet cvii. He is determined to "spite Death." (Note the firmness and sternness of the lines in which the resolve is taken.)

Sonnet cviii. A most important self-revelation. His "true spirit" is to be found in his works; his theme is old, but antiquity shall be his "page," his attendant; every day he will "say o'er the same" in praise of the "sweet boy," "eternal love," his ideal.

Sonnets cix.—cxii. As a player, seeking temporary applause from those whom he despises, he has been "false of heart" and has wandered from his ideal. Yet the falseness has only been superficial; in reality he has never forsaken his loftier purpose, and the sad necessities of his

situation are more to blame than he. If his life had been better provided for, he would never stray from the chosen path, and his name would not receive a brand.* But now there will be no further turning aside—" you are my all-the-world," and

> In so profound abysm I throw all care
> Of other's voices, that my adder's sense
> To critic and to flatterer stoppèd are.

The importance of these last four Sonnets, most poignant, intense, and impressive as they are in language and declaration, cannot be over-estimated. They are a very clue to the poet's mind. They reveal the acute suffering and the strenuous struggling of the aspiring genius who finds himself impeded, dragged down, trammelled, by the conditions of his early life. Yet the heroic nature triumphs, and he chooses the better—though, for the time, the harder—part. What, then, is the actual nature of the resolve taken? To remain the friend of a particular nobleman who has smiled upon him and advanced him money? That, indeed, would be "tearing a passion to tatters." However pleasant a personal friendship might be—a friendship there was no fear of the poet's losing—there

Warning against personalism.

* Isaac Disraeli seems by mere chance to have summed up this portion of the Sonnets in his essay on "Poets made by Accident." "If Shakespeare's imprudence," he remarks, "had not obliged him to quit his wool trade and his town; if he had not engaged with a company of actors, and at length, disgusted with being an indifferent performer, he had not turned author, the prudent woolseller had never been the celebrated poet."

could be no call for this passionate declaration of constancy. And had not the poet already said?—

> Let not my love be call'd idolatry,
> Nor my belovèd as an idle show,
> Since all alike my songs and praises be
> To one, of one, still such, and ever so.

Here he seems distinctly to put us on our guard against a personal application of his meaning. His "love" was not a man for whom he had such extravagant devotion; his "all-the-world" was the ideal he had resolved to worship, because through that worship would come immortality, and "time's tyranny" would be defeated. We will see how these remarkable stanzas are supplemented.

Sonnets cxiii., cxiv. He is "replete" with his friend; were he not, he would seek after vanity.

Sonnets cxv., cxvi. The love of the ideal more and more possesses him, for it alone is worthy of love. It is his complement. Poetry and idealism are inseparable. "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment. . . Love's not Time's fool."

Sonnets cxvii.—cxxi. If, says the poet, he has at times "hoisted sail" to winds which bore him away, have not others done the same? And the compensation is, that—

> Ruin'd love, when it is built anew,
> Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.

He now rejoices in a fortified faith. "*I am that I am!*"

Sonnets cxxii.—cxxiv. After this last declaration he can confidently defy Time, and he does so. "I will be true, despite thy scythe and thee." He will labour for Posterity—he will so work that he will never be forgotten.

Sonnets cxxv., cxxvi. And to conclude the argument—temporary renown is nought; "dwellers in form and favour lose all"; love is all that endures. The poet cares nothing for the applause of the hour, and he will be true to his ideal: that perfection, that love, which is the master of time.

So the Section concludes, a sequence of wondrous power and of sustained argument. Such Sonnets as these are essentially confidential, written for the poet's own satisfaction, setting down his secret thoughts and desires. Too sacred for publicity, they would be withheld from all eyes save those of the most intimate of friends who, to some extent, may have guessed the lordly ambition of the mighty genius who was soon to make his bid for immortality. The worshipped beauty of the poet's Sonnets was not the beauty of a man, but of a spirit. Shakespeare knew himself, realised the opportunities before him. How should he choose? He longed for recognition; longed to dazzle the eyes of men with the splendour of his genius; longed for honours and wreaths. We know how human he was in these respects. But, thank Heaven, although in the end he found it possible to enjoy worldly riches by means

The Poet's predominant wish.

of his exercised talents, in those early days, when all was dubious, he chose the better part and preferred faithfulness to an ideal to the rewards of the day for an easier task. Yet the temptation to depart, to lower his standard, and to seize present joys, was acute; and in the section which follows, we see how he wrestled with the "worser spirit" who would have lured him from the contemplation of the Highest.

SECTION F.—"THE DARK LADY."

Sonnets cxxvii., cxxviii. The poet describes a dark beauty, a woman of grace and charm despite her mournful eyes, a woman of sweet bewitchments who can enchant his ear with melody and draw all his thoughts unto herself. He knows her foul, yet cannot but perceive her fair, for she pleases both his sight and hearing by her magic spells. Who is she? A woman? Or a beautiful devil such as were sent to tempt the saints?

Sonnets cxxix.—cxxxii. At the sight of her the poet is filled with unlawful desires, and, like other men, he knows not how "to shun the heaven that leads men to this hell." Yet he is still aware that he is the victim of some subtle illusion, and that his temptress is not fair as she seems to be. When he examines her in detail he finds her loathly; she excites only his scorn and contempt; her beauty is the beauty of leprosy and contagion. He

knows this, he is convinced of it—*yet*, such is his helplessness in her presence, he must call her fair. She is a tyrant; he is her slave, so submissive that she can fool him to believe that she is a precious jewel, not a creature of contempt. She torments him, yet he dotes on her; she is all arts, and tricks, and cunningness.

Sonnets cxxxiii.—cxxxvi. What is the first result of this traitorous, designing ambassadress of evil? She robs him of his friend—his "better part." She conquers his "will," and the word-play of Sonnet cxxxv. means that the wilful one conquers the will of Will.

The Temptress

So thou, being rich in *Will*, add to thy *Will*
One *will* of mine, to make thy large *Will* more.

The puns on "Will" now become quite clear in their significance.*

Sonnet cxxxvii. The poet confesses that, in yielding to this temptress, he has chosen the worse part. She is the whole world's commonplace; everyone may have access

*The word-plays in the Sonnets may be significant or not. Such word-plays were common enough at the period at which Shakespeare wrote, and he was himself an inveterate perpetrator of them. Take, as an example out of many, the conspicuous example in *King Richard III.*—

"This hand, which for thy *love* did kill thy *love*,
Shall for thy *love* kill a far truer *love*."

(*Act I., Sc. II.*)

to her, and he is no richer for gaining her affection. His "heart knows" this; he laments his folly and his error, but cannot escape the wiles that hold him in bondage.

Sonnet cxxxviii. He knows her to be a lying jade, yet he hearkens to her—nay, so enslaved is he that he believes in her, and makes himself her accomplice in untruth.

Sonnet cxxxix. He admits he has fallen a victim to her engaging aspect, her "pretty looks"; and, temporarily, she has given him some satisfaction. She diverts his enemies, also, and they must "dart their injuries" elsewhere.

Sonnet cxl. But he begs her not to "press his tongue-tied patience" for he is already full of sorrow, though speechless, and if she is not wise in her cruel exactions he may revolt.

Sonnets cxli.—cxliii. Now comes a partial explanation of all this symbolism. The woman-temptress personifies worldly pleasure of easy attainment, the receipt of praise for work done without an effort, the gain of rewards for achievements which have not been prompted by the "better angel." The poet was at war with himself. He hungered for praise, and he fed himself with the husks of common applause instead of waiting for

the heavenly manna which would fall in due season. No doubt the conflict between stage-life and the true poet-life was intense, and he wavered. He heard the cheers of the mob—the "wide world's commonplace"—and for a time was satisfied. He took the present good, and forgot the future glory. He loved that which, when his ideal had been clear before him, he had despised; he satisfied himself with the music of flattery and the smiles of friends when he should have been seeking better things. He had grown reckless; the "foul" had seemed "fair" to him, and the "dark" mistress had deprived him of the "fair" friend through whom immortality was to come. Yet, with all his gains of the moment, he remained dissatisfied, and, after all, he could say with a pang—"Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tone delighted." Here is the cry of the despairing heart:—

> So will I pray that thou may'st have thy *Will*,
> If thou turn back, and my loud crying still.

Unless she can appease him, unless she grant him full satisfaction, unless the gain she offers him is what he craves, he will yield to her "will" no more. Sonnets cxliv., cxlv. The frank avowal at once

follows and helps further to elucidate the poet's situation :—

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still ; The two Spirits.
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.

One, the woman, will win him to hell; the other showed him heaven. But are they one and the same? Has the angel who gave him the vision of the larger fame turned fiend and offered him the unsatisfying sight of narrow renown? This is the only possible solution to that most enigmatical of stanzas which concludes :—

I guess one angel in another's hell :
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

Sonnets cxlvi.—cxlviii. These sonnets show the poet again pining for the larger fame; the fever for the "better part" rages within him.

Sonnet cxlix. Can the poet combine the two, partake of both?—that is, can he have present praise and, at the same time, work for future fame? In accepting the one, does he not run the risk of forfeiting the other? The sharing of the two spirits seems impossible—one must be forsaken or the other renounced.

Sonnets cl.—cli. What does love teach him? He returns to the old idea, has faith in the old truth, and now expresses it in the triumphant and assuring words:—

> My soul doth tell my body that he may
> Triumph in love.

Sonnet clii. He perjured himself when he declared that the bastard fame of the hour was best, and when he swore that the foul mistress was fair. And, with this recognition of the truth, with reborn faith in the original ideal, with renewed devotion to the "fair" friend, and utter spurning of the "dark" woman for whom he was forsworn, the Sonnets end.*

The whole argument: "all one."

Stated in a sentence or two, the argument apparently is this: The poet, young, ambitious, about to commence his life task, aspires after immortality and scouts the idea of mere temporary popularity. He fixes upon an ideal, the highest attainable, and resolves to make a sublime attempt to reach it; but on the way he is tempted aside, and for a time falls under the spell of the "worser spirit" who debases his thoughts, lowers his aspiration, and offers him the applause of his contemporaries in place of the applause of posterity which would be so much more difficult to command. But this leaves him unsatisfied; he desires more than that fleeting fame which

* The last two Sonnets (cliii., cliv.) are translations from the Greek, and do not belong to the sequence.

is the "commonplace" of the many, of the "wide world." He returns therefore to his ideal, which alone will enable him to defy Time and Death.

Every student knows that Shakespeare *did* write and work for posterity, that the future was always in his thoughts, and that he had constant "dreaming on things to come." His dramas were to be "for all time," and "were not written solely with an eye to two or three hours' traffic on the stage."* We know also that, as an actor, he won a name for himself, and that there may have been times when the "bravos" of the audience were so sweet in his ears that he temporarily forgot his higher and more arduous mission. Undoubtedly he was tempted from the difficult, thorn-beset path of authorship, at that period thronged with powerful rivals, and made to pause on the easier and more rapid means of achieving a reputation. The conflict was a sharp one, but the "better angel" prevailed. Shakespeare was not destined to "sell cheap what is most dear"; he comprehended his true mission—and fulfilled it.

Thought for the future.

But, it will inevitably be asked, why should the poet chronicle such secret things as these in a long series of Sonnets? As well ask why Pepys kept a diary in cipher in which he recorded every deed, every experience, every temptation, every secret of

* *Vide* article by Mr. J. F. Nisbet—"Did Shakespeare write for Posterity?"—in the *Academy*, Nov. 27th, 1897. I should have liked to deal with the subject at length, and advance arguments in favour of the theory; but the mere suggestion must now suffice, particularly as it is unlikely that the idea will be combated.

his daily life. An introspective poet like Shakespeare could scarcely help recording his emotions, and, as his thoughts flowed in numbers, and the Sonnet was the most convenient vehicle for his thoughts, we can at once divine the explanation. In the Sonnets we see how the poet relieved those feelings which could no longer be pent, no longer be restrained, in his mind. They are the diary of his emotions.

Sonnets and Dramas connected.

Let it be remarked, however, how entirely the poems of those groups which I have called A, B, C, and D, differ from those in groups E and F. In the first four series we have casual though favourite subjects; in the last two we have an outpour of private communing, of personal sentiment. The former fact is easily demonstrated by the close relationship existing between the themes treated in the Sonnets and the themes treated in the Dramas. Here we arrive at a most important development. I take the Sonnets to be in great measure an index to the plays, inasmuch as they represent such moods as the poet was liable to, and such as he was influenced by when he wrote *King Lear*, *Troïlus and Cressida*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*—to name no others for the moment. The Sonnets are thematic, and the Dramas work out and elaborate the theme. The resemblances are too numerous and too striking to permit of any other conclusion than that the poet deliberately repeated himself and copied his own first exercises. He was not so gravelled for lack of matter as to be forced to do this unless he wished; but he *did* wish to "use up"

the material accumulated in the Sonnets, which had never been intended to stand by themselves as evidences of his literary powers.

Mr. Palgrave said that, although each Sonnet was an autobiographic confession, "we are completely foiled in getting at Shakespeare himself; and these revelations of the poet's innermost nature appear to teach us less of the man than the tone of mind which we trace in his Dramas." And Dr. Brandes, in his massive work, dwells again and again upon the fact that the Dramas "embody feelings and thoughts to which Shakespeare had given expression in his Sonnets." In his second volume, Chapter xxvii, he devotes page after page to proving the fact that the "Dark Lady" was a model and that Cleopatra was drawn from her. As a matter of fact, "Dark" was the Shakespearean analogue for "Temptation," and we trace the prototype in a dozen of the plays.

Mr. Gerald Massey has emphasized the fact that numerous instances can be found of likeness in thought, image, and expression between the Sonnets and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. The "tone and mental tint" are also similar. These plays were probably written between 1592 and 1597, just the period during which the Sonnets were in course of composition. Mr. Massey prints three pages of parallel passages from the Sonnets and the four Dramas named, and he says that "in most instances the thought or illustration was first employed in the Sonnets," then

Some parallels.

transferred to the plays. What can we logically deduce from this? The Sonnets crystallised certain thoughts and themes which the poet wished to elaborate in the plays. Read the Sonnets through, and you find half-a-dozen problems treated in the Dramas concentrated within them.* The argument to marry is repeated in the same strain in *Venus and Adonis*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; the subject of men's friendship occurs in *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Comedy of Errors*; the caprice of women, the wiles and temptations of men, find similar expression in the Sonnets and in *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Compare Sonnet l. on the subject of banishment with the speech of Bolingbroke on going into exile; and compare Sonnet lv. (the thoughts of a lover in time of absence) with Valentine's Letter to Sylvia (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*)—"My thoughts do harbour with my Sylvia nightly." Note the idea in Sonnet cxxiv.—"Love suffers not in smiling pomp," and see how it is repeated in *As you Like it*, *King Henry VIII.*, and *Julius Cæsar*; note the reference in Sonnet cxix. to ruined love,

* The limits of this volume alone prevent me from reproducing the parallels, some two hundred in number, which I have noticed or gleaned from the fields of other Shakespearean investigators. The list would occupy at least twelve pages. It includes resemblances between subjects, repetitions of phrases, paraphrases of lines, and reproductions of characters. I can but indicate where the parallels and coincidences are to be sought, and have returned to the subject in the concluding chapter.

which, when built anew, grows fairer than at first, and then compare it with the argument in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Match the "better angel" of Sonnet cxliv. with the "better angel" cursed from the side of Othello; and observe how the theory of human existence explained in Sonnets xliv. and xlv. corresponds with that in *Twelfth Night*—"Doth not our life consist of the four elements?" and with that in *Henry V.*—"He is pure air and fire, and the dull elements of earth and water never appear in him." If the poet wrote with genuine personal feeling of remembrance, friendship, and love, surely he would not use up the thoughts and the words on other occasions, and for other purposes. We do not thus utilise private love-letters, say, for a novel. Yet Sonnet cxxii. was transferred to *Hamlet*—a graceless proceeding if the Sonnet were inspired by feelings that should have been as sacred as they were private. This peculiar specimen of the poet's method is particularly worth observing. He writes with seeming passion:—

Private or public?

> Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
> Full charactered with lasting memory,
> Which shall above that idle rank remain
> Beyond all date, even to eternity:
> Or, at the least, so long as brain and heart,
> Have faculty by nature to subsist.

And this is how the ardent declaration reappears in *Hamlet*—

> From the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records,
> And thy commandment all alone shall live

> Within the book and volume of my brain.
> Remember thee?
> Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
> In this distracted globe.
>
> (*Act i. Scene v.*)

I claim that, if Shakespeare really addressed the Sonnet to a person, to a woman above all others, protesting his fidelity and his unforgetfulness, he behaved discreditably in transferring a sacred love-missive to a public drama. But, on the other hand, were he only exercising his pupil pen, or writing Sonnets for his own satisfaction, he was justified in turning them to account in any way he chose at a subsequent period. And from all that we can infer, he regarded these Sonnets as the "first draft" of certain poetic work upon which he was engaged, and upon the definite form of which he was about to determine. A great work still lies before the Shakespeare scholar, and that is to establish the complete links, to trace the many resemblances, between the Sonnets and the Dramas. The one part of the poet's work is the clue to the other part. The Sonnets are crowded with germs, and those germs flowered forth into the Dramas—themes, passages, whole scenes, or acts, or plays. We can now understand why Shakespeare did not wish his name to be revealed as the author of the Sonnets—

Mere exercises.

> Do not so much as my poor name rehearse.

The Sonnets were not to stand by themselves, and were not to go to the public as finished work and

specimens of his craft. They were preliminary studies for work which was maturing. Why should he repeat seventeen times over the one argument in favour of marriage, unless he were exercising himself in the theme? Why should he describe the "fair" man over and over again, and give us the same portrait time after time, unless he were striving after the most satisfactory effect to his artist sense? If the Sonnets were addressed to persons, why did he, immediately afterwards, give them impersonal application in his Dramas, and why did not the persons referred to object to this abuse of private missives? When the Sonnets were published, no one, friend or enemy, looked for the Dark Lady, or spoke of the poet's mistress. There was no whisper against him. His relationship with a "whitely wanton" was unknown and unsought for. Why was there no outcry, no scandal? Because the poems were never regarded as personal confessions, as pure autobiography; they were regarded simply as dramatic exercises on given subjects. No one would have dreamed of looking for the "Dark Lady" any more than of looking for the casketed treasure in Sonnet xlviii. Supposing we grant that there are allusions to Lord Southampton in the Sonnets (Number xxvi, by the way, as Dr. Drake has pointed out, is almost a paraphrase of the dedication to his lordship of *The Rape of Lucrece*) —they are so covert, and so obscure, as to be almost unintelligible to the general reader. If the Sonnets are personal, then *Venus and Adonis*, *The Lover's Complaint*, and *The Passionate Pilgrim*

must be personal also, for they deal with variations of one theme, the relationship between men and women, tempters and tempted.* But the themes needed no personal inspiration; truth to tell, they had already been ably treated in Sidney's *Arcadia*, much in the same vein. Shakespeare never returned to the Sonnet form of composition. The Dramas were the higher development of them and provided greater scope for his genius. His primary purpose had been served. Henceforth the supreme task alone, that task which was to bring him immortality, absorbed his attention. He had decided on his ideal, and he never deserted it, never swerved. The Dramas were his life-work, and into their fabric he wove all that he had done, all that he had thought, all that he knew. It mattered nothing to him what had gone before, what he had wrought in early days. Let the Sonnets go—what is good in them can be incorporated in the greater achievement, and

The Sonnet-themes developed.

* Notice this sequence:—In *Venus and Adonis*, the woman tempts the man; in *The Lover's Complaint*, the man tempts the woman; in the *Sonnets*, the woman fools the men, and friendship triumphs over wantonness; in *Lucrece*, the woman's purity triumphs over man's vice; and in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, there is a catching-up of the various ideas, the passion for women, the cynical contempt for their falseness, the despising of mere physical beauty, and bitter laments on false friendship. There is no more reason for deeming the Sonnets personal than the other four poems. The "I" and the "you" in one case are no more to be identified than the "I" and the "you" on the others. These variations of theme, this taking of sides on one question, are full of suggestion as to the working of the poet's mind. He touched every note in love's harpsichord, and here we perceive his exercises in each key.

aid the supreme end in view. More than that matters not. Beautiful as the Sonnets are, it may be doubted whether Shakespeare regarded them as an essential part of his literature. They had been, in his early years, the accompaniments to his life, the revelations of alternate moods, bright and sombre, sad and gay. They became the epitome of his dramas. The "Dark Lady" represented the evil genius of man; the Friend was the better guide. The woman was the temptress, worthless in herself, not beautiful to the true discerning eyes, yet alluring to man's weakness—a Cressida to Troïlus, a will-o'-the-wisp who leads to ignominy and death.

Truth in allegory.

How can we believe that Shakespeare told the story of his own shame in the Sonnets?—he who believed "good name in man and woman is the immediate jewel of their souls"? Was there a man more sensitive on the question of personal honour than Shakespeare? Yet we are asked to credit that in fifty passionate Sonnets he trumpeted his own degradation and folly. No, he did but contrast light with darkness, and mark the struggle of a great soul in its contest with Time—Time which

> Doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
> And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;
> Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
> And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.

Yet he had hope his "verse would stand," if he remained constant to his ideal, writing "all one" in "praise of his worth."

Life, fame, the conquest of death, immortality—these are the Sonnet themes.

Our great poet left no record of himself save in his works. In them we can read and comprehend him. Is it not likely that his early Sonnets were a chronicle of his early years? They throb with passion, they abound in confidences, they are a self-revealing, they are the analysis of a poet's soul. Therefore they are comparable to a diary—Shakespeare's Diary!—not confessions of folly, or panderings to patrons, but a diary of allegory and parables, worthy of his genius, impressed with his individuality. It is the story of a striving, soaring, resolute soul, a soul tempted earthwards, but, after passing through stages of doubt and fear, choosing the upward path. The theme is immortality, and it never varies. Even in the opening stanzas, when a man is urged to marry, the reason is not human happiness, but that a "name shall live." This is the Alpha and Omega of the poems—"And, death once dead, there's no more dying then." As Charles Knight says—"He exhausted every artifice of language to present one idea under a thousand different forms—

"Shakespeare's Diary!"

> Varying to other words;
> And in this change is my invention spent.

The theme undergoes variety in illustration and exemplification, but otherwise it is 'ever the same.'"

How to preserve the name from oblivion by leaving heirs—this is the theme of the first seventeen

Sonnets; how to achieve fame by persistent and magnificent celebration of a "fair," goodly, and true ideal—this is the theme of the "fair friend" Sonnets; how to resist alluring temptations, which would be present pleasures, but would imperil future renown—this is the theme of the "Dark Lady" Sonnets. Our poet writes "all one, ever the same." Had not Dante Gabriel Rossetti such thoughts in his mind when he wrote that glorious exposition?— "All one, ever the same."

A Sonnet is a moment's monument—
  Memorial from the soul's eternity
  To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,
Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,
Of its own arduous fulness reverent:
  Carve it in ivory or in ebony,
  As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see
Its flowering crest impearled and orient.

A Sonnet is a coin; its face reveals
  The soul—its converse, to what Power 'tis due,
Whether for tribute to the august appeals
  Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,
It serve; or, 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,
In Charon's palm it pays the toll to Death.

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CHAPTER IV

SHAKESPEARE SELF-VINDICATED

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I HAVE spoken venturesomely of "Shakespeare's Diary," a poet's journal, recording in cryptic and allegorical form his varying moods and his favourite themes. We know that the Sonnets were private. We know that the leading ideas contained within them recur in the Dramas, as a favourite face flashes out from a Raphael painting. We know that the Sonnets are irregular and, possibly, ill-arranged. Were "W. H." the inspirer of them, we should be compelled to account for the series as a connected whole. He would be the pivot upon which everything revolved. By dismissing a personal inspirer we are at liberty to read deeper and more varied meanings in the poems, and do the poet greater justice in the act. He is not expected to keep within narrow bounds; he is not enslaved by a trivial and undignified subject quite beneath his powers.

Shakespeare left no biography; yet we divine him in his works. His character shines out; we feel the beatings of his heart; we encounter him.

Self-Revelation of the Poet.

"In Prospero shall we not recognise the Artist himself—

> That did not better for his life provide
> Than public means which public manners breed,
> Whence comes it that his name receives a brand—

who has forfeited a shining place in the world's eye by devotion to his art, and who, turned adrift on the ocean of life in the leaky carcass of a boat, has shipwrecked on that Fortunate Island (as men always do who find the true vocation) where he is absolute lord, making all the powers of Nature serve him? Of whom else could he have been thinking when he says:—

> Graves, at my command,
> Have waked their sleepers, ope'd, and led them forth,
> By my so potent art?

Was this man, so extraordinary from whatever side we look at him, who ran so easily through the whole scale of human sentiment, from homely commonsense to the transcendental subtlety of—

> No, Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change;
> Thy pyramids, built up with newer might,
> To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;
> They are but dressings of a former sight—

was he alone so unconscious of powers, some part of whose magic is recognised by all mankind, from the schoolboy to the philosopher, that he merely sat by and saw them go without the least notion what they were about?"

The Lesson of Adversity.

Thus Mr. Russell Lowell. He agrees that Shakespeare was self-portrayed in Prospero, and that the key-note to Prospero's character is found in the Sonnets. He agrees that Shakespeare had to "find his true vocation"—a weary, troubled time of doubt and waiting is at once implied; and he acknowledges that, by his devotion to his art, the poet "forfeited a shining place in the

world's eye." Do not the Sonnets tell us all this? Take one passionate outcry (cxix.):—

> What potions have I drunk of syren tears,
> Distill'd from limbecks, foul as hell within,
> Applying fears to hopes, and hopes to fears,
> Still losing when I saw myself to win!
> What wretched errors hath my heart committed,
> Whilst it hath thought itself so blessed never!
> How have mine eyes out of their spheres been fitted,
> In the distraction of this madding fever!

But the poet, at this period, learnt the master-lesson of "the benefit of ill"—even as the exiled Duke learnt the uses of adversity, and Prospero, the fortune of misfortune. The man of the Sonnets is identical with him who—

> Neglected worldly ends, all dedicate
> To closeness, and the bettering of his mind
> With that which, but by being so retired,
> O'erprized all popular rate—
>
> (*Tempest*, Act i., Scene ii.)

with that Prospero who prized his library above his dukedom; both are one, both are the enchanters who, withdrawn from the world, learnt the secret of magic spells and rare enchantments, and reached the Happy Island after storm and sea-sorrow. In the Sonnets and in *The Tempest* the poet may alike explain:—"I have given you here a thread of mine own life, or that for which I live," and we can plainly read—"The table wherein all his thoughts are visibly character'd." Like Prospero, too, in the full vigour of life and intellect, he abjured his magic, broke his staff, and buried his book. The parallel is complete.

Personal theory means degradation.

Professor Dowden, without a pang, accepts the idea of Shakespeare's folly and degradation. He can only explain the "dark period" in the poet's life by ascribing to him personal vice. It does not occur to him that soul-torture, and not the torture of a jealous heart for the favours of a coquettish and capricious courtesan, was the salt spring of Shakespeare's sorrows. And so he writes—

> All the indications derived from Shakespeare's writings seem to point to the conclusion that there was a period of his life when, as Hallam says, "his heart was ill at ease and ill content with the world or his own conscience." We may take the year 1600 [the Sonnets were published in 1601] as a convenient date for marking the turn in Shakespeare's temper, which, however, was, of course, not a thing of an hour or a day. And it may be that in the obscure confessions of the Sonnets we find the key which unlocks the secrets of their writer's heart. That he passed about this time through a moral crisis seems certain.

So far, so good; but now observe how Professor Dowden, having reached the point, at once flies off at a tangent and commits himself to the theory which arises like a foul miasma from Shakespeare's shame.

> If we may trust the Sonnets, he says, (though by this he means, simply, if we may trust a superficial reading of the Sonnets, and an apparent, not real, meaning), he had given away his affections to a friend who wronged him, and though in the end Shakespeare transcended his sense of injury, the pain and indignation left a deposit in his spirit. But, what was worse, he had himself chiefly to blame (!) He had yielded to the fascination of an unworthy love (!) and was betrayed by her who had played with all her art upon his passions, as a musician might play upon the strings of a lute; his pleasure,

which at one time had been free from prickings of remorse, turned in the end to bitterness. These experiences left him in no fit mood for the making of mirth; but, if they darkened, they deepened his knowledge of the human heart and its mysteries of passion. "The memory of hours misspent," goes on Hallam; "the pang of affection misplaced or unrequited; the experience of man's worser nature which intercourse with unworthy associates, by choice or circumstance, peculiarly teaches; these, as they sank down into the depths of his great mind, seem not only to have inspired into it the conception of Lear and Timon, but that of one primary character—the censurer of mankind." (Dowden's *Introduction to Shakespeare*, page 74.)

Constancy to a traitor!

This train of reasoning leaves one salient fact in the Sonnets totally unaccounted for. If the poet had this bitter "experience of man's worser nature" and realised the result of "intercourse with unworthy associates," why did he not renounce the "friend" who had brought him this shame and sorrow? He never did renounce the "friend." He clung to him, first and last; he continued to offer him homage and worship; he did not mourn his friendship or its results; he continued to find that this very man of "worser nature"

> Did exceed
> The barren tender of a poet's debt;

he added more and more to the friend's "rich praise"; he begged not to be forsaken and promised never to forsake; he vowed eternal constancy, and was not false to his oath; and at the very end we find such outbursts from the heart as—

What's in the brain that ink may character,
Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?
What's new to speak, what new to register,
What may express my love, or thy dear merit?
Nothing, sweet boy ; but yet, like prayers divine,
I must each day say o'er the very same ;
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,
Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name.
So that eternal love in love's fresh case
Weigh not the dust and injury of age.

(cviii).

And again—

O, never say that I was false of heart,
Though absence seem'd my flame to qualify.
As easy might I from myself depart,
As from my soul, which in thy breast doth lie :
That is my home of love : if I have ranged,
Like him that travels, I return again ;
Just to the time, not with the time exchanged,
So that myself bring water for my stain.
Never believe, though in my nature reign'd
All frailties that besiege all kinds of blood,
That it could so preposterously be stain'd,
To leave for nothing all the sum of good ;
For nothing this wide universe I call,
Save thou, my rose ; in it thou art my all.

(cix.)

Of these passionate, unequivocal, unmistakable protestations neither did Hallam, nor Professor Dowden following him, take the slightest heed. They ask us to credit that Shakespeare had discovered, and had his life permanently embittered by discovering, the "worser nature" of his personal friend—that friend to whom his last words were that he was the centre of the poet's universe and "all

the sum of good." The idea perishes, receives its death-shock never to revive, in the two stanzas just quoted.

Shakespeare's "Dark Period."

It was the "dark woman" only who was renounced; the "fair friend," never. It is the woman only who darkened the poet's life; who created his fears; who robbed him of his joy; who poured bitterness into his life; and who, after his fever, left him self-condemnatory—

> For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
> Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

This, and this alone, is the sinister figure who, dark itself, clouded the poet's existence, and made him pessimist and censurer. His realisation of the falsity and barrenness of an ill-directed and diseased affection; his surrender of reason during the period that he had fallen victim to a sinful fever which left him "frantic-mad with evermore unrest"; the re-action from sickly appetite for baser things which caused him to say "past cure I am, desire is death"—these things account fully for the Dark Period in his life. Lear and Timon, seeking the pleasures and successes of pure worldliness, sprang Minerva-like from the gloomy brain. The Dramas were a rebuke to false ambition, to weak credulity, to misplaced trust, to unworthy hope. Of these errors Shakespeare himself had been guilty during the time that he had sworn his "foul mistress" fair and found himself ruthlessly betrayed. He had entered upon a course which, if persisted in, would have meant catastrophe, loss of use and fame.

Merlin, when he yielded to the beguilements of Vivien, experienced no greater danger than that which threatened Shakespeare when he was drawn aside from his main purpose, and turned from the "fair" friend, the true ideal, to the illusive wanton who promised him his heart's desire, but would have left him beggared. He was led to the brink of the precipice, and saw the devastation and ruin gaping below. The vision sufficed. He was not engulfed.

The Poet's Rescue from Ruin.

But knowledge came, and out of that knowledge emerged the terrible Dramas in which "the harmonies of beauty are shattered by the discords of despair," in which "evil and good are shown in immediate opposition, bad and good humour being in direct conflict with each other." It is the theme of the Sonnets again. Shakespeare was in no mood to write other than dramas on the doom of worlds, so Dr. Brandes tells us, and he proves his point by taking the Titanic tragedies of *Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. And what is Cleopatra but the "dark lady"?—the very impersonation of that Delilah who draws men from their strong purpose, and corrupts the powers of giants?* Shakespeare tracked the virus in great men's natures. In Macbeth it was perverted ambition; in Antony it was sensuality. Had he not felt the stings of the poison himself when the "dark mistress" had perverted his own ambition and inspired him with the love of temporal pleasure? In the story of Cleopatra he found the very means of telling his

The fall of great men.

* *Vide* "William Shakespeare, a Critical Study," by George Brandes, vol. ii., caps. xxv., xxvi., xxvii.

own secret—for was not Cleopatra "beauty and fascination, sensuality and culture, whose name meant ruthless squandering of human life and happiness and the noblest powers? Here, indeed," continues Brandes, "was the woman who could intoxicate and undo a man, even the greatest; uplift him to such happiness as he had never known before; and then plunge him into perdition, and along with him that half of the world which it was his to rule." Yes, it is the story of the Sonnets again. Note how nearly Brandes comes to the truth I am endeavouring to expound in these pages, and how he half-confirms the conclusions I have set forth—

Who knows! If he himself, William Shakespeare, had met Cleopatra, who knows if he would have escaped with his life! And had he not met her? Was it not she whom in bygone days he had met and loved, and by whom he had been beloved and betrayed? He, too, had stood in close relation to a dark, ensnaring woman. She, of whom he never thought without emotion, his black enchantress, his life's angel and fiend, whom he had hated and adored at the same time, whom he had despised even while he sued for her favour—what was she but a new incarnation of that dangerous, ensnaring serpent of the Nile? And how nearly had his whole inner world collapsed like a bubble in his association with, and separation from, her! That would indeed have been the ruin of a world. (Vol. ii., p. 144.)

Constant thoughts on Temptation.

But it degrades the subject to say that Cleopatra was the incarnation of a Mary Fytton. That cannot be allowed. She was the incarnation of that allegorical figure who typified in the poet's mind an arch-temptress, she it was who drew his better angel from his side and tore from his bleeding heart the agonising laments—

> My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
> At random from the truth vainly expressed;

and

> O me! what eyes hath love put in my head,
> Which have no correspondence with true sight!
> . . . . . .
> No marvel then though I mistake my view.
> . . . . . .

and that sad, humiliating confession, "All my best doth worship thy defect." This was no individual Mary Fytton, but the symbolic creature, composite of Cleopatra, Cressida, and Macbeth's wife.

The Sonnets as clue to the Dramas.

The Sonnets, once separated from trivial and worthless personalities, fall into place and become part of the poet's planned-out work. They afford a valuable clue to the Dramas, and they enable us to follow distinct trains of thought in the poet's mind. The relative position they occupy to the Dramas is that of an artist's studies to a completed picture. In the Sonnets we find figures again and again to be grouped together in the Dramas; we find ideas and suggestions again and again to form the staple arguments in the Plays. The suffering, tempted, ambitious, fearing man may be outlined as Othello or Lear, Hamlet or Macbeth, Antony or Troïlus, but he is always at heart the man of the Sonnets with his hope and dread, his soul-crisis, his speculation on life and its purposes. Shakespeare's greatest heroes, his sublimest conceptions of men, are those who have risen to majestic heights but lost their balance; forsaken or misunderstood their duty; become infirm of purpose; suffered perversion or corruption; and been drawn aside from the

supreme goal by a "worser angel." Such are Hamlet, Antony, Lear, Macbeth, and Angelo. Shakespeare seems to have lived through his own temptation again in depicting these men, and to have speculated on the tragic ends to which such temptation leads. And the tempting, betraying, beguiling woman, too beautiful to be resisted, too cruel to be endured—she is alternately a Lady Macbeth, a Cleopatra, a Goneril, a Cressida, a Tamora—the personification of all that corrupts the great man, that shatters the noble intellect, that undermines giant-forces in human nature. These "dark" women haunt Shakespearean drama. They are the forerunners of ruin and desolation, who come shudderingly upon the scene, imaged there by the man who had realised in all its poignancy that

The "Worser Angel."

> Proper deformity seems not in the fiend
> So horrid, as in woman.

Kings, philosophers, conquering soldiers, fell victims to the syrens of subtle charm. Each, like the once-proud Antony, could say to his temptress :—

> My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings,
> And thou shouldst tow me after : O'er my spirit
> Thy full supremacy thou knew'st ; and that
> Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods
> Command me.

It seems to have been the purpose of Shakespeare to demonstrate in many ways that man's "worser angel" is ever at his side ; that in Eden there is ever the lurking serpent ; and that the fall of the finest hero from his high estate is inevitable. It has been said that Shakespeare had a contempt for

women. This is only a half-truth. The man who drew Cordelia, Isabella, Imogen, and Hermione must have had the most chivalrous and honourable regard for the sex. But he seems to have roughly divided women into two classes—the women who made, and were ever willing to make, self-sacrifice; and the women who lived only to ensnare and enthrall mankind. There is nothing between the devoted woman and the selfish wanton, and the latter is the "dark lady" of the Sonnets. Shakespeare saw in women of this species the bar to genius, the drag to enterprise. The leading thought in the Sonnets seems to be compressed in that magnificently bitter speech of Ulysses to Achilles who would have rested on his laurels and striven no more to reach the ultimate goal. The best and most potent arguments of the early poems are summed up in that one oration: the outcry against the world's ingratitude and the ruination of time:—

Angel or Fiend.

> Time hath, my lord, a wallet on his back,
> Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
> A great-sized monster of ingratitudes:
> Those scraps are good deeds past, which are devoured
> As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
> As done: . . . . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . . Oh, let not virtue seek
> Remuneration for the thing it was;
> For beauty, wit,
> High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service,
> Love, friendship, charity, are subject all
> To envious and calumniating time.

The fear of rivals, the fear of loss of renown, the fear of forgetfulness, the fear of death (not bodily but spiritual), the fear of fading memory, the fear of disaster arising from cessation of effort and the abandonment of a true ideal—these were the Sonnet-themes, and each separate fear is reproduced in the speech of Ulysses. These fears did not originate in a trivial cause, in a shallow love for a Court coquette; they lie so deep, they are expressed with such painful intensity, that we know their origin must be looked for in deep places only. Shakespeare was shaken in spirit, not by the thought of a lost mistress, but by the hardest contest that man can wage, the contest with Time. He knew, like Ulysses, that "emulation had a thousand sons," and that

Genius must keep straight on.

> If you give way,
> *Or hedge aside from the direct forthright,*
> Like to an entered tide, they all rush by
> And leave you hindmost.

Had he not said so, years before, in the Sonnets numbered from lxxviii to lxxxvi? Had he not feared rivals, and thought that, by being excelled, he "to all the world must die"? But after the period of temptation, after the lapse from the true ideal and the "fair friend," he resolved not to give way or "hedge aside from the direct forthright," and that resolution was his salvation. He achieved his work, and secured the immortality after which he aspired. Conscious of his genius he went onward, defiant of the "worser spirit," that universal type of polluting pleasure and degrading corruption.

The poet's purpose—"all one, ever the same."

I have striven to make clear the dominating purpose in Shakespeare's life, to show that that purpose can be read in the Sonnets, and to prove that it underlies the motive of several of the Dramas. I have tried to show how closely Sonnets and Dramas are interlinked—how the threads of the one are woven into the fabric of the other. I have endeavoured to demonstrate what the crucial struggle in the poet's life must have been, and what fierce ordeal he passed through. I have attempted to free him of the charge of lasciviousness, more particularly because I can find in that baseless imputation no adequate explanation of the passion which ruled him to the end of his career, and was as pronounced in his last writings as in his first. And, above all, I have earnestly laboured to convince the poet's worshippers that the object of their veneration is worthy of the sentiments he inspires; that he understood his mission and realised his powers; that he walked unguessed-at among his fellows that his future triumph should be the more secure; that he worked for posterity and was constant to his ideal; and that we best gratify that lordly and expectant spirit by trusting in his manhood's honour and doing justice to his exalted motives.

SUMMARY

SUMMARY

ALTHOUGH a summary of the conclusions arrived at in these chapters is likely to be misunderstood, and may, by itself, appear weak and impotent, yet I venture to append a concrete statement in the hope that the issues will be clear, and that the arguments supporting them will be duly considered:—

1. The Sonnets were written, for the most part, in the poet's younger days, were the work of his "pupil pen," and were not intended for publication.

2. They were "procured" by a publisher's acquaintance ("Mr. W. H.") after a few private friends had been permitted to read specimens, and they were issued, without the authority or consent of the author, by Thomas Thorpe, and remained unacknowledged.

3. The Sonnets, despite their extreme beauty, are not the perfected work of the poet; some are

incomplete, some manifestly require revision; and several which are included in the series have no connection with the general scheme.

4. On analysis, the Sonnets are found to treat of some dozen distinct themes, sometimes briefly, sometimes at considerable length, sometimes exhibiting variety and development, but not infrequently being useless repetitions of one argument or the same idea.

5. The Sonnet-sequences thus marked off appear to be exercises upon suggested subjects, and those subjects, possibly, though not probably, were suggested in a few instances by events in the career of his friend and patron, Lord Southampton.

6. The larger proportion of the Sonnets are, however, no more than an ardent young poet's exercises, in the favourite method of the period, upon themes which most strongly appealed to him; and though a personal experience or an episode in a friend's life may have prompted the first outburst, the continuation of the theme ceases to have personal references.

7. In the Sonnets we may read of the poet's intense hopes and fears regarding his fate, and we learn of his all-consuming desire for immortality. Begin as he may with his theme, he almost invariably merges into allegory, and represents himself as the contestant of death. Bodily death he does not fear: oblivion he dreads. He therefore argues incessantly on the course he shall pursue to defy

the ravages of time and prevent the loss of reputation. He may have the applause of the day (on the stage); or he may command lasting renown (by his pen). His "fair friend," his "better angel," bids him to seek immortality; his "dark" mistress, the alluring woman with the "mourning eyes," tempts him to delights of the present. The two series of poems are almost wholly allegorical and antithetical.

8. The Sonnets served the purpose of a poet's diary in which to record his private thoughts and to enshrine passing sentiments. Hence the strict privacy in which they were kept, and Shakespeare's repugnance to the thought of publication.

9. Furthermore, at the time the Sonnets were in course of composition, Shakespeare was preparing his first Dramas. The thoughts, phrasing, and arguments on general subjects in the Sonnets were capable of being "used up" in the new works, and accordingly we find nearly every sentiment of importance re-appearing in almost identical language in the half-dozen plays which he issued during the next few years. The Sonnets are, in fact, the actual source or the tributary of the Dramas upon which the poet had decided to stake his reputation. Henceforth he forsook the Sonnet form of composition, and cared nothing for the nightly applause he could obtain by making himself "a motley to the view."

10. The meanings of the Sonnets are thus found to be mainly autobiographical, but always tending

towards allegory; the motives of the poet are found to be: to record as in a diary his private aspirations; to celebrate personal events; to exercise his "pupil pen" upon themes; and to use up the material thus obtained in the great work which he had set himself to perform in order to win immortality. His "fair friend" triumphed by keeping him faithful to the best ideal, and the "dark woman," his temptress to baser and more evanescent pleasures, was foiled. The "better angel" triumphed in the contest for the man's soul.

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